DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 107 738 UD 015 175

AUTHOR Levine, Daniel U.; Doll, Russell C.
TITLE Inner-City Schools and the Beginning Teacher: A Dialogue.
INSTITUTION Phi Delta Kappa, Bloomington, Ind. Commission of Education, Human Rights, and Responsibilities.
PUB DATE 66
NOTE 33p.
AVAILABLE FROM Phi Delta Kappa, 8th and Union Streets, Bloomington, Indiana 47401 ($0.50)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.95 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Teachers; Classroom Communication; Disadvantaged Youth; *Educational Problems; *Inner City; Low Income; Student Attitudes; Student Needs; Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Role; *Teaching Guides; Urban Environment; Urban Language; *Urban Teaching

ABSTRACT

This booklet addresses the beginning teacher whose assignment is an inner-city school. It advocates that each new teacher in the inner city should have what amounts of a self-administered interview schedule, focusing on points one needs to keep uppermost in one's mind if one wishes to be effective in working with low-income youth. This protocol focuses on 11 issues: (1) recognizing, understanding, and taking into account the conditions in which many of the students grow up; (2) the lack of experience with, and knowledge of, even the most basic words, concepts, and facts of many disadvantaged students; (3) the negative factors in the child's environment that might influence judgments of his potential; (4) the interpretation of student reactions; (5) recognizing and using positive forces in the students' neighborhood; (6) the danger of too openly and too frequently exhorting students to try harder in order to ensure themselves of successful careers as adults; (7) the danger of "giving up" on students; (8) acceptance or rejection of inner-city students' language; (9) the feelings of insecurity which most disadvantaged students feel in school; (10) expectations of the teacher regarding his role in an inner-city school; and (11) deciding on priorities in professional and personal life. (JM)

INNER-CITY SCHOOLS AND THE BEGINNING TEACHER

A Dialogue

By

DANIEL U. LEVINE, *Associate Director, Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems in Education, University of Missouri, Kansas City, Missouri*

and

RUSSELL C. DOLL, *Assistant Professor, School of Education, University of Missouri, Kansas City, Missouri*

A project of the
Commission on Education and Human Rights
Phi Delta Kappa
Eighth and Union
Bloomington, Indiana
47401

Price fifty cents

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Introduction

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-352) foretold the end of legal segregation in the South. The enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Public Law 89-10) saw the beginning of massive Federal support for public education at the elementary and secondary school level. While the Congress of the United States was wrestling with the problems attendant to the passage of such landmark legislation, educational leaders in school systems comprising the metropolitan areas of the United States were agonizing over another kind of problem: schools and school programs in the inner city. Violence of one sort or another in the classrooms of inner-city schools was on the increase; competent, experienced teachers with seniority were asking to be transferred to other, less "trying" schools; parents were besieging school administrators with increasing fervor for every conceivable reason; the self-discipline and understanding of students and parents alike approached nil; experienced teachers, new to the systems, broke contracts rather than accept assignment to an inner-city school; and in all the mounting confusion the school administrator was expected to operate an effective instructional program.

The conditions just described continue to exist, and in order to "maintain school," some administrators have turned to assigning beginning teachers to the "blighted schools" of the inner city. One might question the wisdom of such practice, but the alternatives (increased teacher-pupil ratio, closed schools, and the like) are considered worse. Another approach is to provide training and support for the beginning teacher to acquaint him with the real conditions of the school-community and the people in it.

This booklet has been prepared to aid the beginning teacher whose assignment is an inner-city school. The con-

tent can be read without difficulty and can serve as a basis for further group discussion of the problems likely to be encountered in such schools.

This is another in the series of booklets being prepared by the Phi Delta Kappa Commission on Education and Human Rights for school personnel as they face the problems of our time.

James H. Bash, for the Commission

INNER-CITY SCHOOLS AND THE BEGINNING TEACHER

A Dialogue

In a rational world few beginning teachers would be placed in inner-city schools attended by low-income youth handicapped by a multiplicity of severe learning disabilities. Impaired in cognitive development and unable to exercise the strict self-regulation required of students in a formal classroom, many of these youngsters are victims of their disadvantaged backgrounds. Such youngsters are not only difficult to teach but difficult to control. As a result, many students in the inner city do not respond satisfactorily to the conventional approaches which the beginning teacher has mastered during his undergraduate apprenticeship. What these students most need is the careful guidance of a competent teacher who, in several years of teaching, has honed a variety of teaching skills without which a teacher can hardly succeed in handling disadvantaged youth.

The beginning teacher, however, must master the basic mechanics of teaching. He must learn, for example, how to address pupils in a firm or mild tone, as needed, and how to pace a lesson which is neither too long nor too short. He must master the art of building flexibility into lessons without allowing himself to be completely sidetracked from the original objectives. He must learn when to call on pupils and when it is best to leave a child alone, just as he must learn the danger signals which indicate that a potential discipline problem is about to arise. All of these and many other skills must be refined and mastered to a point that allows the teacher to give simultaneous and almost automatic attention to each of them.

The beginning teacher who is faced with frequent emergencies in controlling pupils cannot concentrate on the conscious mastery of each of these skills. Instead, he finds himself quickly overwhelmed. For both students and teacher, the results can be disastrous.

Despite the inadvisability of assigning beginning teachers to the most troubled schools in the inner cores of our central cities, it is nonetheless true that, for a number of reasons, many new teachers employed by large urban school districts are placed in such situations. Many of the available vacancies, for one thing, are created when experienced inner-city teachers with seniority choose to transfer to outlying schools. In addition, the very difficulty of the job entrusted to teachers in the inner city leads many to quit teaching or to leave such areas in favor of positions in prestigious suburban communities. Moreover, big-city schools which require added faculty because they are gaining students generally are located in the core sections to which low-income citizens are condemned by their poverty as well as by social and racial discrimination. And, finally, recent increases in the resources available for educating low-income youth multiply the number of teaching personnel needed in the inner city, thus adding another factor which channels new teachers to positions in schools attended primarily by low-income youth. Since it is almost certain that these factors will persist in the future, most beginning teachers in the large cities will continue to receive initial assignments in the core areas where they may not be prepared to function as effectively as experienced teachers. *If new teachers must acquire the understanding of the behavior of disadvantaged youth through a long period of trial and error, they may well become discouraged and leave the profession; therefore, it becomes imperative to help beginning teachers understand the behavior and learning problems of the disadvantaged child before, or during, their first year in the inner-city school.*

Much of what happens in any given teaching situation is likely to escape the notice of a beginning teacher who necessarily must focus on the tangible problems and occurrences which demand his immediate attention. One of the things the beginning teacher in the inner-city school can do to build the kind of competence that normally comes only from a great deal of experience is to give thought to a series of questions which focus on the attitudes and behaviors of disadvantaged youth and which have sig-

nificant implications for his choice of instructional methods and curricular approaches. Each new teacher in the inner city should be provided with what amounts to a self-administered interview schedule, focusing on points he needs to keep uppermost in his mind if he wishes to be effective in working with low-income youth. Such a protocol should include discussion and commentary designed to help him understand the problems posed in each question and to stimulate constructive reflection on what teaching behaviors are most appropriate in the low-income classroom. There follow eleven questions which might go into such a protocol.

Appropriate Teaching Behaviors

1. How can I learn to recognize and understand the debilitating conditions in which many of my students grow up, and how can I take these into account in determining what demands I will make and how I will make them?

Intellectually, most Americans are well aware of the fact that many inhabitants of our decaying urban centers live not only in abject poverty but in social environments characterized by extreme disorganization, hopelessness, and senseless violence. Without personal contact with life in the slums it is difficult to visualize how unimaginably squalid and debilitating it is to live there, and how hard it is for a student from such an environment to meet the "normal" demands of the school. Precisely because the ugliness of life in the slum is so difficult to imagine, the teacher must make a constant and conscious effort to perceive it accurately and recognize its effects in the behavior of his students; otherwise his recognition will be on the verbal level only, and he will not really understand the source of many of the disciplinary and scholastic problems with which his pupils confront him. The most obvious remedy, of course, is for the teacher to visit the homes of his pupils, in the course of which he can hardly avoid glimpsing the forces which motivate his pupils. Where it is possible, in fact, it is wise for all beginning teachers to make such visits, in

order that they may attain the depth of understanding shown by a teacher who visited the home of a pupil and reported that:

> Jimmy's family lives in an apartment in a building which was once a fine one-family home I counted six mailboxes on the front of the house, so I assume that at least six families now crowd into the dwelling. So many floorboards were missing that I wondered how long I could stand on the porch without falling in.
>
> Although I was not expected, the mother came to the door and welcomed me in. She asked me to sit on the "good" end of the sofa, after she had "broomed" it off. She explained that the dogs had been chewing on the other end. The cotton stuffings had fallen to the floor, leaving the springs exposed. The mother was extremely thin and smoked cigarettes continuously. Most of her teeth were decayed and brown-looking and yet she didn't really appear very old. Western music blared from a record player behind the woman. There were two bedrooms in addition to the front room and kitchen. The parents and baby used one, and the remaining six children shared the other.
>
> The children came in and Jimmy sat beside me while the four dogs started again on the chewed end of the sofa. The other six children, all barefoot, clustered around their mother. All of them, girls and boys, were bare above the waist. None was clean.
>
> The mother told how they had gone to the Ozarks last week to help her sister move. "My sister," she added, "don't think I got a good man because he's a drunk and he beats me, but I don't think he's so bad. He bought me this watch for Mother's Day cause we don't have no clock in the house. [I am sad to say I had been scolding Jimmy for being tardy.] I knows it's wrong when he buys beer stead of milk for these here younguns, but he's promised to buy me a washer. It's real hard to wash by hand for nine people. [To think I had nagged her son about being dirty.]"
>
> When it was time to leave the mother wanted to give me one of the dogs to take home. I thanked her, but refused. Then she offered me one of their seven cats. Much as I hated to seem ungrateful, it was necessary

to turn down that offer aiso. As I left, the children followed me to the car and waved goodbye until I turned the corner at the end of the block.[1]

The parenthetical remarks make it evident that this visitation will help the teacher to be more tolerant—without condoning—Jimmy's lack of cleanliness and punctuality. Jimmy is only a first-grader and, given his home situation, manifestations of improper school decorum are beyond his control. To push too hard on him, therefore, would serve no constructive purpose, and could only *convince him that his teacher has no meaningful understanding of the reality of his life, thus opening a gap between student and teacher which would widen with the passage of time.*

In general, educators who really appreciate the difficult circumstances in which their disadvantaged pupils live are better able to maintain a flexibility which helps them maintain good relationships with pupils. Recognizing, for example, that pupils have no quiet or private place to study, they make an extra effort to conduct supervised study activities and to avoid overly rigid policies in assigning and collecting homework Inner-city teachers are in a position to convince students that school demands are reasonable and really should be lived up to, provided they avoid the mistake of using unwholesome home conditions as an excuse to eliminate homework or to allow disadvantaged pupils to permanently ignore meaningful standards of performance. Without such tolerance and flexibility, the inner-city classroom tends to degenerate into a battleground on which warring factions act out a mutually dissatisfying charade which contributes to no useful educational objective.

2. In what ways should the fact that many disadvantaged students lack experience with, and knowledge of, even the most basic words, concepts, and facts influence my methods of instruction in the classroom?

Many disadvantaged youth live in chaotic surroundings

[1]Carole C. Duncan, "Home Visitations of Disadvantaged Children With Emotional Handicaps," a paper prepared for a course at Central Missouri State College in Teaching the Emotionally Disturbed and Maladjusted, July, 1966.

which almost unbelievably restrict their range of experience. The emphasis is on survival, often leaving little opportunity to acquire knowledge of the everyday objects and ideas on which middle-class students are weaned. Some have never traveled more than a mile or two from their home, even by the age of nine or ten. Many grow up hearing and speaking dialects which embody rudimentary language patterns and which bear little resemblance to the formal language of the school. Here again, inner-city teachers are well aware of the experiential deficits their pupils bring to school. Almost without exception, they insistently tell visitors about the unusually limited backgrounds of their students.

It is extremely difficult, however, for a teacher to operate continuously on the assumption that his pupils may have only a fuzzy conception of the materials presented to them. He would not be human if he were not tempted to assume that pupils have some familiarity with commonplace materials of our culture, and materials they have been previously exposed to in school. It is not easy to remember that many pupils are so remarkably deficient in background, and have learned so little in their previous years in school, that even material which the teacher considers elemental may be foreign to students from disadvantaged homes. At the primary level, for example, it is not an unknown occurrence to find disadvantaged youngsters who do not know the names of their brothers and sisters, or have never seen, much less used, a pencil or crayon. Teachers of social studies in low-income high schools find that some of their pupils have no idea whether there are 10 million or 200 million people in the United States, or indeed the approximate numbers signified by the term "million"; others are unable to estimate whether the term "middle ages" stands for a period of history approximately fifty, one thousand, or five thousand years past, despite the fact that they may already have completed one or two years of world history. Unless the teacher makes it a point to determine whether pupils understand the fundamental vocabulary, factual data, and concepts on which he builds his lessons, he will leave many students at the "starting gate," to stare with blank expres-

sions at what transpires around them and respond with desultory disdain when called on to contribute to class discussion. Teachers are understandably displeased at the need to begin by reteaching elementary materials which should have been mastered earlier, rather than the more advanced material which they spent years of their own lives in learning to teach. Verbally, every teacher knows and understands this need to begin where the pupils are, but it is extremely difficult for the inner-city teacher to avoid assuming that his students possess at least a modicum of prior knowledge and experience which many have not acquired. It cannot be done without continuing, conscious effort.

3. What are some of the negative factors in the child's environment that might influence my judgments of the potential of the child? What are the pitfalls to be avoided?

While taking pains to recognize the severely limited background of many of his students, the inner-city teacher must realize simultaneously that even the worst background does not make it impossible to give a child significant assistance. This may be hard to see, because we tend to interpret the situations of others in accordance with our own previous experience. In particular, we tend to predict the possibilities of success or failure on the basis of the factors our own experience has told us are associated with success or failure. We have our own picture of what constitutes a "good" situation for academic success, and much of the data we receive from disadvantaged children do not fit this picture. For this reason we tend to view the situation in which the child lives as rather hopeless, and to make a final, fatal judgment: "Poor kid, what chance does he have?"

It is important to remember that in school we monitor only a small part of the available data, and that we are selective in extracting information from these data. What we may easily observe is that the child comes from a "violent" home, because we know the father has been put

in jail for hitting the mother. We have evidence that the child's home is dirty and disorganized, so we conclude that he is neglected by his parents. Or, we learn that the mother was discovered with a "boyfriend" or the father with a "girlfriend." Conclusion: The child is gravely affected by the "immoral" situation. But, since our information regarding the home is taken from selected incidents, we cannot assume that there is continuous violence or "immorality" or neglect, or that these preclude a warm and loving relationship between the child and his parents, or, indeed, between the parents themselves, in their fashion. Dirty clothes need not mean parental neglect; they may merely mean a different standard of cleanliness. *Because standards of cleanliness are not necessarily related to feelings of affection or strength of family ties, we cannot assume the detrimental effects of parental neglect from a pair of soiled trousers or a "ripe" aroma.* Neither can we conclude automatically that the child is adversely affected by the presence of a boyfriend or girlfriend in the home, for while such a situation may shock moral sensibilities, there is no one-to-one relationship between an "immoral" environment and a child's achievement potential.

Too often, then, we tend to fixate on the emotional and sensational, and this leads us to conclude that there is little hope for the child: "What's the use? Look at what we're fighting in his environment." A fight in the home or a "boyfriend" in the home does not necessarily mean it is impossible to assist the child. No matter how hopeless the situation may seem to the teacher, it may not seem so hopeless to the child. *And because it isn't hopeless to the child, he may never accept, unless we teach it to him, the deadening conclusion that he is doomed because of his environment.*

1. Am I too ready to interpret student reactions at face value? Are my students really as slow and backward as their behavior sometimes indicates?

Although some economically disadvantaged students are remarkably deprived in terms of the prior knowledge they are supposed to have mastered at a given grade level, many

are not nearly as lacking in understanding and information as they sometimes pretend. The pretense of ignorance may serve a useful purpose to children who for one reason or another are reluctant to respond positively to the probings of a teacher. Some would rather appear ignorant and fail than face the possible discomforts associated with active participation in the challenging intellectual life of the school. Holt, in his magnificent book, *How Children Fail*, has described some of the motivations of such students, and the "strategies" with wnich they mislead a teacher into underestimating their abilities and their grasp of school-related subject matter. Holt explains that children fail to live up to their native capacities because

> . . . they are afraid, bored, and confused. They are afraid, above all else, of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for them hang over their heads like a cloud.[2]

Basing conclusions on his observations of students in his own and other classes, Holt proceeds to describe how he gradually came to recognize that

> . . . there is a peculiar kind of relief, a lessening of tension, when you make a mistake. For when you make one, you no longer need to worry about whether you are going to make one. Walking a tightrope, you worry about falling off; once fallen off, you don't have to worry. Children, to whom making mistakes is acutely painful, are therefore under great tension when doing something correctly. Worrying about the mistakes they might make is as bad—no, worse—than worrying about the mistakes they have made. Thus, when you tell a child that he has done a problem wrong, you often hear a sign of relief. He says, "I *knew* it would be wrong. . . ."
>
> Children . . . may decide that, if they can't have total success, their next-best bet is to have total failure. Perhaps, in using the giving or withholding of approval as a way of making children do what we want, we are

[2]John Holt. *How Children Fail* New York. Pitman Publishing Company. 1964, xiii

> helping to make these deliberate failures . . . children find, or try to find, in hopeless incompetence the kind of refuge that an alcoholic finds in liquor. . . . Incompetence has one other advantage. Not only does it reduce what others expect and demand of you, it reduces what you expect or even hope for yourself. When you set out to fail, one thing is certain—you can't be disappointed. As the old saying goes, you can't fall out of bed when you sleep on the floor.[3]

Holt's concern is not with economically disadvantaged youth *per se, but with psychologically insecure students who can be found in almost* any school or classroom. It makes sense, however, to assume that on the whole, students in the inner city are more likely to adopt a strategy based on feigning ignorance than are students in more advantaged communities. The disadvantaged child, for one thing, is not as likely to experience pressures from parents to achieve at a high level when he is disinclined to attempt potentially shattering tasks in school. His teachers are often predisposed to believe that he really is as backward as he may want to appear.

The undeniable gap between his own experience and the world of the school means that learning is more difficult for him than for his middle-class peer; as a result, he tends more often to see schoolwork as insuperably difficult. Since he probably has failed in the past, and since his image of himself is likely to reflect the low evaluation and stereotypes which the wider society attaches to low-income minorities, he relies more commonly on the kind of psychological defenses described by Holt. To find him retreating into the protective shell of ignorance should come as no surprise.

It is by no means contradictory to point out that although inner-city teachers cannot assume their students are familiar with even the most elementary subject matter, they commit an equally grievous mistake in assuming pupils are fully as deprived as their outward behavior may sometimes indicate. The tension between these two considerations illustrates why teaching the disadvantaged is, perhaps,

[3] *Ibid*. pp 40. 59.

the most extraordinarily difficult and complicated challenge in education. It indicates why the beginning teacher in the inner city needs special help in acquiring the understandings which are otherwise attained only through long, painful years of relative ineffectiveness in the classroom.

5. Have I attempted to recognize and capitalize on the positive forces in my students' neighborhood?

Despite the cultural poverty of low-income communities, they are rich in possibilities for educational experience. In one low socioeconomic area in Chicago, for example, there may be found a complex of sites of historical and economic significance to the city and the nation. These sites are all within walking distance of four schools in the area. There is the site of the world-famous McCormick Reaper Works and the International Harvester Company. The area contains one of the most complex railroad yards in the country. The Chicago Sanitary Canal, which carries barges loaded with raw materials down to the Mississippi as well as to the many industries along its banks, may be seen from the windows of these schools. A mighty generating station, supplying electricity to a large section of the city, is three-quarters of a mile from the farthest of the four schools. Within a short two-mile car or bus trip is the rich heritage of the historic Chicago stockyards. A visit to any one of these sites can be utilized as a valuable educational experience. Whole units of American history alone could be built on things the children are exposed to every day.

Yet not one of the teachers in the four schools was aware of the possibilities to be found in the area. None had taken a class to the various sites, though students had been reading of these very places in grade-level books. As a result, the students were not made aware of the historic significance of their area, or of the fact that their fathers were contributing significantly to the economic life of the city and the nation.

The teachers' failure to relate relevant aspects of the

community to the formal curriculum did not mean they were poor teachers. They had merely *assumed that the community did not have significant potential for educational enrichment* because it was a low-income community; a "poor" community; an "industrial" community; a community of noise, dirt, and smoke; a community which one leaves for a better one. When the potentialities of the area were pointed out to the teachers, they saw immediately that this seemingly "poor" community could provide a source of rich educational experience.

These sites in the low-income community may hold intrinsic motivation for the low-income child. They are places the students have played near and can visualize. Many of their fathers have, or still do, work in the factories along the canal and in the stockyards. By using the intrinsic motivation based on familiarity and identification, the teacher gains an advantage in attempting to develop the broader aspects of American history and economics and in relating the familiar to the unfamiliar, the specific to the general, and the simple to the complex.

In addition to the educational possibilities within the low-income community itself are the educational possibilities to be found in the downtown core of the city which generally is adjacent to many of the city's low-income areas. The core area has many historical sites where events which contributed to the growth of the city took place. It contains many engineering marvels. The activities which take place there are vital to the city and nation. In Chicago, for example, slum children play in the shadows of the great skyscrapers and near the historical landmarks of the city. They wander close to the site of Fort Dearborn, or the path of Father Marquette, or the site of the Civil War prison camp, Camp Douglas. They are near one of the world's greatest trading centers, near an engineering feat which has reversed the flow of a river, near a world seaport in the middle of a continent, and near the headquarters of one of the most elaborate and modern police systems in the country. It would take only a short trip to provide many of the children with first-hand experiences of places, events,

and activities around which much of the school's curricular material is organized.

6. Am I too openly and too frequently exhorting my students to try harder in order to ensure themselves of successful careers as adults?

Disadvantaged students need to know that success in life depends on success in school, that success should be defined not in terms of grades but of the substantial achievement which follows from hard work and perseverance. Those who belong to racial minorities must be helped to realize that the discriminations of the past are being stripped away, opening many new opportunities which will mean bright futures for youngsters who take advantage of them. Unfortunately, too many well-intentioned teachers are succeeding only in repelling rather than motivating their disadvantaged pupils, by constantly reiterating that "You can do better if only you try," or "It will be entirely your own fault if you make poor use of the chance I am giving you to learn in school."

It is natural for the new and enthusiastic inner-city teachers to want to communicate these "truths" to pupils whose futures depend on this recognition. Possessed with this admirable missionary spirit, however, a teacher often fails to recognize that the problems involved in motivating low-income youth are very complicated ones which cannot be solved by simplistic appeals to their hopes for a better future. Simple exhortations, reflecting the teachers' own "middle-class" value system and a lack of knowledge of the problems faced daily by these children, serve only to widen further the psychological distance between teachers and pupils.

Discussions with disadvantaged youth reveal that almost all of them realize that their futures depend on hard work and success in school, though many cannot articulate this awareness very well and for many others it may be perceived only dimly and almost unconsciously. Why, then, do so many fail to behave accordingly? There are many reasons, not the least

important of which is related to their inability to regulate their desires and impulses in accordance with long-range goals whose attainment requires many years of deferred gratification. *Even more important, however, is the tendency for constant reiteration of the need for achievement to raise more obstacles than it reduces.* All of us build elaborate sets of psychological defenses and rationalizations to protect ourselves from feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness as we cope with the painful assaults of an imperfect world. Because disadvantaged citizens—by definition—suffer even more defeats than others in striving to overcome the real hurdles raised by a competitive, technological society, their psychological security depends on rationalizations which are even more pronounced and closer to the surface than is true among a middle-class population. Inevitably seeing themselves, and being seen by others, as failures in an affluent society, they would not be human if they did not try to retain their self-respect by believing that they never had a chance. Superficial lectures about "raising oneself by one's bootstraps," as British sociologist Peter Marris has pointed out,[4] imply that their previous failures and their present circumstances are a result primarily of their own incompetence. Rather than accepting an implicit argument which destroys the respect he feels—and must feel—for himself, his relatives, and his neighbors, the disadvantaged child disregards his teacher, but not before noting, though only semi-consciously, that the exhorting adult has questioned the very basis of his worth as a human being. *Having had the fragile fabric of his rationalizations and psychological well-being severely threatened, he may well proceed to "tune out" his teacher and the school entirely.*

The beginning teacher, consequently, needs immediate help in understanding how disadvantaged pupils will interpret his enthusiastic pep talks, before he has fallen into the habit of conducting progressively longer and more accusatory

[4]Peter Marris, "A Report on Urban Renewal in the United States," in Leonard J. Duhl (ed.), *The Urban Condition: People and Policy in the Metropolis* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

character-lectures to counter the proportionately decreasing attention which students pay to his remarks. Otherwise, the tendency for pupils to write him off as "just another preacher" will, in turn, reinforce his suspicions that perhaps his students couldn't amount to very much to begin with, and by degrees his originally "sympathetic" efforts to build motivation will transmute themselves into an insensitive diatribe.

There is no paradox, then, in concluding that the way to overcome the poor motivation of disadvantaged students is *not* by launching direct verbal assaults on the unresponsiveness and lack of effort which are the inseparable concomitants of their dependence and powerlessness. The school situation itself, as Haggstrom has perceptively observed, almost inevitably arouses frustrating feelings of dependence and inadequacy among the poor, and the effective teacher will do everything possible to avoid communicating impressions, such as the following, which activate rather than reduce defensive rationalizations:

> . . . the meaning of the dependence and powerlessness of the poor is difficult to appreciate. We can stimulate the messages more concretely by translating them into sentences We can repeat the message carried primarily in one direction by conventional adult education and training programs approximately as follows:
>
> "You are ignorant. You are stupid. You are inferior. You are worthless. Come to us. We are superior. We are educated. We are valuable. We will help you to become important and valuable and good and educated like us. Imitate us. Do not be like your friends. Do not be like your neighbors. They are ignorant and stupid too. Leave them and quit being like them. Come and be like us."
>
> If the poor could reply, if their message in response could be heard, and if they had a collective opportunity to formulate a message, it would be:
>
> "But I love my family, respect my parents and neighbors, do not really believe they are worthless. I do not want to leave them, even though I need a good job and

a better place in which to live."

Since the poor do not reply, but mostly withdraw, the programs of the affluent community are put forward more aggressively and in greater variety. Their new message:

"You are just like them all. Apathetic, a short-time perspective, worthless, not even educable, just like your parents, family, friends, neighbors."[5]

The beginning inner-city teacher will need to resist the temptation to moralize, frequently and at length, about working hard in school. But this need not mean he cannot help disadvantaged students acquire a definite, realistic understanding of the importance of doing well in school. Without undue verbal moralizing, the teacher can and should work to motivate his pupils toward more serious interest and commitment to learning. He can, for one thing, search out contemporary sources and biographies which illustrate the link between achievement in school and in society. He can bring in guest speakers, particularly young adults of the same ethnic group as his students, who grew up in poverty areas near the school and achieved success in a variety of careers.[6] When he does find it necessary, in individual counseling or in class discussion, to point out that his pupils are harming themselves by neglecting their responsibilities as students, he makes it abundantly clear that he intends no disparagement of their characters. Instead, he lets students know that he believes all humans, including himself, have serious fallibilities. He guards against becoming overly critical of the shortcomings of his students, since he remembers that his true feelings eventually will communicate themselves to students no matter how hard he tries to disguise them. He is careful, in short, to avoid the temptation to become an avenger, because he knows that though such a role will assuage his own frustrations, it cannot but have a detrimental effect on his students.

[6]Warren Haggstrom, p. 150, "Poverty and Adult Education," in Frank W. Lanning and Wesley A. Many (eds), *Basic Education for the Disadvantaged Adult: Theory and Practice*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966.

7. Do I keep in mind the possibility that "giving up" on students can fan the flames of future discontent and violent protest in depressed communities, no matter how justified it may seem or how frustrating their behavior?

Despite the understandable readiness with which the poor attribute their lack of status and power to forces beyond their control, disadvantaged adolescents have tended in the past to blame themselves for their failures in school. Even today low-income dropouts, asked to explain their lack of success in school, may answer that "I didn't like school" or "I just wasn't on the ball." There are signs, however, that the situation is beginning to change. For one thing, teachers and counselors in difficult schools report increasing hostility and resentment among their disadvantaged students. And not only have the school boycotts in Chicago, New York, Detroit, and elsewhere signaled a dawning awareness among nonwhite, disadvantaged youth that *their school could prepare them much more adequately for a productive future,* but the rationale underlying the boycott is itself calculated to drive home the conclusion that the school is "not doing right by us." Increasing acceptance of such a conclusion could have momentous consequences in terms of the social and racial cohesiveness of the American nation. The individual who places the responsibility for his poor performance in school on the discriminatory inequity of the school system and the society is thereby predisposed *to strike back at society in any way which he thinks may avenge his mistreatment.*

In these circumstances, it is extremely important for teachers to go out of their way to avoid behaviors which disadvantaged students could interpret as uninterested teaching. No matter how "unteachable" a student may seem, or how incorrigible a troublemaker he may be, the teacher must not respond by easing up in his efforts to guide and prod a student toward an improved level of performance. No matter how useless it may seem and how much extra time and effort it may take to grade a sloppy, all but illegible paper, teachers must give the paper the same careful consid-

eration and analysis as one turned in by a positively motivated, middle-class student. This is not an easy thing to do, for teachers are understandably reluctant to "slave" over materials on which students themselves were unwilling to expend any meaningful effort or which never seem to show any significant improvement from one month to the next. To do otherwise, however, to "write off" educationally retarded and poorly motivated disadvantaged youth, is to give them grounds for believing, even if the thought occurs only years later, that "I never had a chance. Society sentenced me to second-rate education from lousy teachers who didn't make me learn and didn't take time to correct my mistakes."

In this context it may be instructive to recall the rowdy, at times violent, demonstrations conducted early in 1965 by students from New York City's special schools for maladjusted and alienated adolescents. Some of these students—along with the demonstrations' sponsors—angrily showed reporters tests and assignments which their teachers had graded as "acceptable" or "100" *despite the fact that the students' work was often illiterate and incoherent and their answers obviously incorrect.* One can sympathize with teachers who not only could no longer summon up the will to give serious consideration to these pitiful papers but who also, perhaps, saw no point in further discouraging students whose previous academic record consisted of an unbroken string of failures. Nevertheless, the long-range outcome of teachers' failure to accurately assess pupil productiveness will be an increase in the number of low-achieving, disadvantaged adolescents and adults who believe that the wider society kept the doors of opportunity tightly closed to them. To feed this suspicion is to pile up the incendiary raw materials which result in conflagrations like those of Watts and Hough.

The public schools must bear a share of responsibility for such holocausts, since effective approaches for educating

---

[6]A valuable example of the use of this approach in a very intensive way is described in Robert Marcus, *et al*., "Cultural Programs for All," *The American School Board Journal*, August, 1966, pp. 3-6, 63

alienated youth have not yet been widely identified and implemented. In addition, the behavior of discouraged teachers may magnify perceptions of injustice among disadvantaged, minority-group students who are becoming increasingly sensitive to any sign of real or imagined discrimination or neglect. We can ill afford to have these perceptions intensified by the thousands of beginning teachers who in years to come will form the backbone of the teaching staff in our depressed urban centers.

8. How necessary is it to correct the language of my students? When I do point out errors in language usage, do my corrections imply any condemnation of their persons or their backgrounds?

The effective inner-city teacher realizes that frequent moralizing may stimulate pupils to reject the very values and ideas he is attempting to communicate. He recognizes, also, that constant and insistent rejection of their language patterns, no matter how atrociously these violate standard English, may backfire in much the same way. Most of our thinking, after all, is in our everyday language, so that the way we perceive ourselves depends on the language with which we frame our self-images. To reject a person's language, therefore, is to imply that there is something wrong with his person. The effective teacher, knowing that productive teacher-pupil relationships depend on the establishment of sincere mutual respect on a deep personal level, makes a fine but extremely vital distinction: *He teaches correct usage, rather than correcting faulty usage.* It is not entirely possible, of course, to teach correct usage to disadvantaged youth without pointing out the sense in which their customary usage is unsatisfactory, but it is possible to eliminate every last implicit vestige of personal condemnation from corrective statements. The effective inner-city teacher explicitly lets students know he sees nothing wrong with their habitual language, but he patiently explains that the formal language of the classroom is a valuable tool which they can master

without feeling any personal guilt over their socialization in another linguistic pattern.

Nathaniel Hickerson has described the unintended consequences of overly conscientious corrections of the language habits of disadvantaged pupils. In a perceptive and eloquent passage, Hickerson point out that

> . . . none can dispute the duty and right of the teacher to help children learn to speak the language correctly Can it be possible, after all those years in elementary school, that the overwhelming majority of these children continue to speak a language unacceptable to the public schools despite the constant correction by teachers? It is certainly possible because it is true
>
> While little success is attained in changing language usage, a great deal is done toward alienating these children by criticizing them . . . In doing so, the teacher forces them to reject school values in defense of her own After Johnny has said for the fiftieth time, "Teacher, I ain't got no pencil," and teacher has replied, pushed beyond patience, "Only people who are uneducated or ignorant say 'aint'. it's wrong," what more needs to be said? Perhaps the teacher means no harm. . . . Maybe only uneducated and ignorant people do say *ain't*. Johnny may not even know what "ignorant" and "uneducated" mean, except that they connote something bad. He does know that his father and mother say *ain't*, and his brothers and sisters, friends and relatives say *ain't*. . . . Only the teachers do not, and, of course, some of the "other" kids in class. No one else No one in his world is one bit afraid to say *ain't*. In fact, no one ever thinks about it What can Johnny do now? He can accept the teacher's word and say *haven't* and try to join her in her way of speaking, or he can say *ain't* and stay with family, friends, and his way of living. . . . She has now pushed him into the dilemma of having to reject the real world that gives him his place and his security if he accepts what the teacher says, because she has denigrated the ways of those closest to him[7]

[7]Nathaniel Hickerson, *Education for Alienation* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966, pp 51 53

Although it is true that some of the most experienced inner-city teachers have not learned to recognize and avoid the deleterious effects of insensitive reprimands concerning language usage, the beginning teacher is particularly liable to fall into the trap of linguistic overcorrection. The new teacher, after all, has not had the opportunity to observe the frustrating lack of results from such an approach, nor has he had a chance to work with students who show they can function competently using either their accustomed dialect or, as the occasion demands, more formal and elaborate language. In his naiveté, he may even conclude that pupils are using incorrect language because their previous teachers have never tried to correct it! It will serve him well to ask in advance whether useful purposes are accomplished by approaching subcultural language patterns in a corrective, pedagogical manner, and to investigate ways in which he might teach correct formal usage without activating the protective defenses of the low-income student.

9. How can I give sufficient attention to overcoming the deep feelings of insecurity which most disadvantaged students feel in school?

Described on the preceding pages are several of the psychological rationalization with which the poor respond to a competitive, affluent society. These descriptions highlighted how the conditions and psychology of poverty create somewhat special educational problems for teachers whose job it is to intervene in a closed cycle of poverty, low achievement, poor motivation, and despairing alienation. Many of these problems, such as the quickness with which disadvantaged youth take offense at attempts to correct subcultural language patterns, their reluctance to attempt intellectual tasks which might result in still another painful failure, and their readiness to disregard and react against teachers whose guidance become excessively moralistic, reflect a generalized insecurity which arises when a person engages in activities for which he has not been adequately prepared.

Almost from their first day in school, disadvantaged

youngsters are thrown into unfamiliar circumstances and activities. The failure of many is almost foreordained. As failures build up, children become increasingly disillusioned about themselves and anxious about their performance.

"If I have not encountered success in these tasks," they must ask themselves, "how can I catch up with those—in this school or elsewhere—who evidently do better?"

"Is there something wrong with me?"

"Will I ever be able to overcome my deficiencies?"

"Why, for that matter, is my life so different and less desirable than what I see in schoolbooks and on television?"

"Do people like me and my family deserve success?"

"Isn't there some easy way to be like other people?"

It requires no explanation to state that crippling feelings of inferiority of this sort will permeate subsequent attitudes and behaviors.

This basic insecurity of the disadvantaged child expresses itself in many ways. Inner-city elementary teachers, for example, often find that those students whose abstract abilities have been most retarded by their disadvantaged background are the first to complain when their instructors introduce materials less complicated than the more abstract materials designated as "normal" for their grade level. This reaction is likely not only because youngsters are understandably embarrassed to have peers see them doing the "babywork" of the lower grades, but also because it is painful for the disadvantaged child to be constantly reminded—by "nonstandard" material—that in achievement, or ability, or both, he has been left far behind. It hurts less to be given material he cannot possibly understand and assignments he will never complete correctly.

Similarly, many high school English teachers in the inner city encounter problems with very low-achieving students who almost demand to be taught the standard rules of grammar—although they have completely failed in previous attempts to master more elementary material—because this is what "we're supposed to be doing in high school." And it may be more comfortable after all for them to see an in-

comprehensible series of parsed sentences on the board than to see less advanced materials which unmistakably call attention to the distressing gap between their current level of performing. At least this allows them—if only for a few scant seconds—to pretend that they are really doing "high school work."

There is no magic prescription with which the inner-city teacher can somehow supersede or wipe away the disadvantaged child's pervasive insecurity. Adequately recognizing it, however, makes it easier for the teacher to avoid inappropriate and insensitive responses which exacerbate a child's feeling that his teachers neither understood nor care very much about him. The teacher who expects to encounter profound insecurity in his pupils, and who has trained himself to look for its manifestations, at least puts himself in a position to maintain the empathy and the flexibility without which he cannot lead students, even gradually, to a more realistic and less troubled mental equilibrium.

10. What can I expect to do in an inner-city school and am I willing to accept this role?

Teacher training emphasizes the academic components in the teacher's role. In so doing, it provides the teacher with certain expectations. These expectations are related primarily to success in the presentation of academic material. The teacher is trained to expect that his role in the classroom is to teach. Any deviation from this is considered to be inconsistent with good teaching behavior. Such matters as discipline, arbitration of fights, or ministration to the disadvantaged child's emotional needs seldom are given the importance they deserve in teacher training. When beginning teachers in the inner-city schools find themselves frequently engaging in these non-teaching roles, they feel confused, frustrated, and defeated. Their anticipation of their role leaves no place for the disciplinarian.

Because the student teacher is often left with the idea that "if the student hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught,"

he concludes that the measure of his success is centered on the achievement scores of the students. However, the academic success of a teacher may not be evident until his students are out of school. Or, for a variety of reasons, children may not wish to perform well for the teacher even though they are learning the subject matter. Consequently, the teacher receives no visible indication that he is succeeding, though he may actually be accomplishing a great deal with a group of students. Consider, for example, author Leo Rosten's recollections of his own boyhood in the Chicago slums:

> Miss O'Neill was dumpy, moonfaced, sallow-skinned, colorless, and we loathed her as only a pack of West Side barbarians could loathe a teacher of arithmetic. She did not teach arithmetic—but that is how much all of us hated her.
>
> She was our English teacher, a 33rd-degree perfectionist who drilled us, endlessly, mercilessly, in spelling and grammer and diction and syntax. . . .
>
> I say that my comrades and I hated Miss O'Neill—but that is not entirely true. I only pretended to hate her. In our sidewalk conclaves . . . I, too, would howl about Miss O'Neill's tyranny, cursing her adamantine ways as fervently as any of my companions. So strong is the desire of a boy to "belong," to be no different from even the grubbiest of his fellows.
>
> But secretely, my respect for Miss O'Neill—nay, my affection—increased week by week. For I was exhilarated by what I can only call the incorruptibility of her instruction. I found stirring within myself a sense of excitement, of discovery, a curious quickening of the spirit that attends initiation into a new world. Though I could not explain it in these words, and would have scorned the Goody-Two-Shoes overtone, I felt that Miss O'Neill was leading me not through the irksome labyrinth of English but into a sunlit realm of order and meaning. . . . For it was not grammar or diction or syntax that Miss O'Neill, whether she knew it or not, was introducing me to. She was revealing language as the beautiful beat

and life of logic. She was teaching what earlier generations so beautifully called "right reason". . . .

I do not think Miss O'Neill had the slightest awareness of her hold and influence on me. . . .

. . if she is among us still, I hope she somehow gets the words of these long-belated thanks for a job supremely well done. I have never forgotten what she taught.[8]

In addition, it must also be kept in mind that successful teaching in the inner-city school involves much more than academic success. Which teacher, for example, is more "successful," the teacher who teaches a spelling lesson in an advantaged school in which the majority of the children get 100, or the teacher who, in the role of "social worker," has provided a disadvantaged child with a little more self-respect for himself and his family, or has, perhaps unknowingly, given him broadened perspectives on what he might do with his life? Success in inner-city schools is less tangible than achievement scores, which are only one gauge of its accomplishment.

The teacher in an inner-city school must be prepared to accept role components other than the academic ones. He must accept the fact that dealing with discipline does not mean he is failing as a teacher, that providing structure in the classroom does not deprive his students of adequate developmental experiences. And, finally, he must accept the fact that in simultaneously fulfilling the roles of counselor and social worker he is not behaving any less professionally than his colleagues in more advantaged communities.

11. Have I decided upon the priorities in my teaching and my personal life?

If the teacher accepts the multiple roles necessary for teaching in an inner-city school, he must accept demands on

---

[8] Leo Rosten, "The World of Leo Rosten Dear Miss O'Neill," *The Saturday Evening Post*, September 20, 1966, p. 19

his time and energies greater than those required of teachers in other areas. The resulting drain on his physical and emotional energy will mean that the teacher is less capable of fulfilling other roles in his role network.

Perhaps one of the most difficult of these "other" roles devolves upon women teachers, that of being a wife. The role of a wife entails a c .tment to one's own children, who should have as muc. .tention and understanding as those in her classroom. It means that one's husband is going to wish to return home to a clean home, be fed a good meal, and engage in some interesting conversation. But teaching in an inner-city school is a full-time job in itself. There is the need for careful individual attention to the students and the students' work, the need to prepare materials other than those found in the textbooks, and the need to construct what almost amounts to an entirely new curriculum. Added to this—and perhaps most difficult of all—is the need to maintain a positive emotional balance when faced with frequent behavioral problems. To meet these demands the role of wife (or in the case of male teachers, the role of husband) is often neglected.

Further, there are other roles which demand time and energy. Some of these roles are found in church work, professional work, the role of scholar (which requires that one keep abreast of a large literature), and the role of "friend" with all its attendant social obligations.

Obviously, if the teacher in the inner-city school wishes both to succeed as a teacher and to fulfill all his other roles, he is faced with a dilemma. He must decide what roles are to have what priorities and at what times.

The choice of priorities is a crucial factor in maintaining one's mental health in an inner-city school. The beginning teacher should realize that it is unhealthy to devote every waking minute of every working day to the classroom. It is possible to be a good teacher and still plan for days in which the pressures of grading and teaching will be less. There should not be feelings of guilt about this. The teacher in an inner-city school gets in deep trouble when, due to "extreme"

dedication, he neglects his out-of-school roles to the extent that this gives rise to personal repercussions which seriously impair his effectiveness in the classroom. He is similiarly asking for trouble if he feels guilty for occasionally easing the teaching role in order to accept and fulfill his out-of-school roles.

It is imperative that teachers in inner-city schools realize the need to set priorities. It is essential that their spouses or friends realize the necessity for the priorities. And it is very important that the teacher feel no guilt when, at times, he gives top priority to his own home life.

Postscript

"To be forewarned," goes the proverb, "is to be forearmed." If there is anyone in education who needs to be "forearmed"—with knowledge and skill—it is the beginning teacher assigned to a difficult school in the inner city where he is called on to master the elements of his craft in an explosive situation which tests the competence of even the most skilled and experienced professional. Sending him in "cold," without a thorough understanding of the special problems and attitudes of the pupils he will encounter, is to neglect the administrator's and the teacher-trainer's joint responsibility to equip him with the mental set and the professional skills that will enable him to respond appropriately and perform effectively. The primary consequences of such an evasion are frustration, panic, and incompetence. It is hoped that serious analysis and self-examination in terms of questions such as those posed on the preceding pages will help prepare the beginning teacher to meet the challenge of the inner-city school.