

## Gentle Teaching in a Violent Society

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*by Martin Haberman*

*This article, one of the most requested in the recent decades of educational HORIZONS, was originally published in Spring 1994, Vol. 72, No. 3. It is reprinted by permission of the author.*

**O**n average 157,000 crimes are committed every day in school.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 525,000 attacks, shakedowns, and robberies occur in secondary schools in one month.<sup>2</sup> Three million incidents of assault, rape, robbery, and theft occur on school property annually. The New York City Public Schools funds the ninth-largest police force in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In 1993, Dade County, Florida, budgeted fourteen million dollars for security.<sup>4</sup> In Rochester, New York, teachers bargained for security ahead of salary.<sup>5</sup>

In the urban community, 25 percent of inner-city youth have witnessed a murder; 72 percent know someone who has been shot.<sup>6</sup> Ten percent of children treated in hospitals have witnessed a stabbing or a shooting before the age of six.<sup>7</sup> In a relatively small city such as Milwaukee, 119 school-age children have been murdered in the past three years. Across the nation, nine hundred teachers are daily threatened with bodily harm.<sup>8</sup>

The society is violent, the urban neighborhoods are violent, and the schools are violent. People who want to teach in urban schools need to recognize the reality of the situation they will enter. Beginning teachers must recognize that preventing violence is an integral part of their legitimate work; the more effective they are at empowering youngsters, the less violence they will engender; the less effective they are, the more violence they will cause. Beneath the surface and not very far beneath the surface of all urban teaching is the potential for unleashing uncontrollable violence. Only those who really understand the constant threat and horrific consequences of school violence will be sufficiently on-guard to do the countless things that will prevent it. Violence is already smoldering in the children, and only those teachers who see the deep frustrations

and anger children carry into the school building with them will be sufficiently sensitive to avoid setting it off.

\* \* \*

Five forces influence youngsters growing up in poverty. First, a lack of trust in adults naturally makes young children suspicious of adults' motives and actions. Appearing to be shy or withdrawing from adults becomes a perfectly normal response. (Not expecting or seeking safety from adults or the solution to one's problems from adults might be another reasonable response.)

The second force affecting development is the violence typical of urban life today. If those around us are potentially dangerous and life threatening, then it is normal to avoid interacting with them whenever possible.

The perception of "no hope" is the third force that characterizes urban life for older children and adults in poverty. It frequently is mistaken as a lack of initiative. If one sees no viable options, it seems useless to expend effort.

The fourth force affecting development is the impact of mindless bureaucracies. It becomes natural, normal—even desirable—to give the bureaucracy what it wants rather than try to respond to it in sensible or honest ways. Only by responding to the bureaucracy on its own terms can any benefits be derived. This attitude teaches children who grow up under such conditions to initiate and reveal as little as possible and only what is being asked of them as their normal response.

The fifth major influence relates to the culture of authoritarianism. The giving and taking of orders becomes the normal way of life. One's power becomes one's self-definition.



Taking all these factors together, the outstanding attribute one can normally be expected to develop as a result of growing up and living in poverty is frustration. Feelings of deep frustration are a major characteristic of both adults and children who grow up and live the experience of urban poverty. And the result of this abiding frustration is some form of aggression. For many it is expressed as violence toward others. For others it takes the form of passive resistance. And for some it is turned inward, expressed in the multiple ways poor people demonstrate a reckless abandon for their own bodies, including suicide.

The world in which poor children frequently begin school is remarkably positive given their life experiences. Not being certain of or trusting adults, surrounded by family and friends being “done to,” living in violence, and having learned how to give and take orders: they still come to school eagerly. It is up to schools and teachers, however, to demonstrate more than a continuation of mindless bureaucracy and overly directive, threatening adults.

The ideology of “star” teachers regarding violence and what they can do about it is both realistic and hopeful. Their first goal is not making matters worse. Their second goal is creating a school experience in which students succeed and relate to one another in ways not determined by the threat of force and coercion. Stars work toward this goal by various forms of gentle teaching. As with the other functions performed by star teachers, this is a combination of teacher behaviors undergirded by the teacher’s ideology; that is, knowing why he or she is performing particular acts and believing these teacher behaviors will be effective. The qualities that bring a teacher function to life and make it effective are the unseen teacher beliefs beneath his or her behavior. If, for example, the teacher’s real goal is to manipulate and control students, it will be sensed, understood, and communicated to the students. If, on the other hand, it is the teacher’s intention to empower the students to control their own behavior, this too will be communicated by the teacher’s actions. Teacher acts never impact on students independently of the teacher’s real intentions. Students will always know whether the teacher’s goal is to control or empower them.

Teachers in schools serving children in poverty have no choice other than gentle teaching. Beyond kindergarten and the first two grades, the teachers can no longer physically control their students with external sanctions or fear. For teachers to pretend they have means to force students to learn or even comply is a dangerous myth that can make poor schools as coercive and violent as the neighborhoods outside the school. Children growing up in neighborhoods where they are socialized to violence, physical abuse, and even death will not be brought readily into submission by such punishments as a time-out

room, suspension, or even expulsion. If the harshest punishments available to teachers and schools can be ignored or even laughed at by the students, why do school officials and teachers continue to pretend they can coerce, force, insist upon, demand, require, or see to it that the children can be made to comply and learn? The only answers I can come up with are that 1) most educators do not know viable alternatives to coercive teaching; 2) those who prepared them to teach could not or did not teach them alternatives; or 3) most people who choose to become teachers were themselves socialized by power relationships and did not have school experiences derived from their intrinsic needs and interests.

If a teacher, recalling his or her own childhood and schooling, remembers a teacher's disapproval, a failing grade, or a father's spanking as a force that "inspired" learning by fear, it is natural to expect this teacher to be shocked when he or she discovers that today's poor students cannot be made to comply, shape up, and do what they are told by the threat of a teacher's scolding, a failing grade, a spanking, or even a suspension. The fears that such threats can instill today are almost nonexistent to a child in poverty who lives daily with threats of death, violence, and abuse. Some teachers give up when they see they do not have powerful negative rewards (punishments) that can force children's compliance. Stars realize very quickly they can succeed only by getting off the power theme; that ultimately each child is in control of how much and what he or she learns. "Make" is the critical word here.

Some teachers seek ways to "make" children learn. Stars define their jobs as "making" them want to learn. How is this related to violence? In a life engulfed by violence, urban schools cannot "make" children or youth comply. They can only select and prepare teachers who will empower students to control their own learning.

There can be no debate about this point. Teachers who start out intending to dominate poor children or youth are doomed to failure. Teachers who seek to empower students may become effective if they believe in and can implement the functions of star teachers. Examples of gentle strategies include the following behaviors:

- Put students ahead of subject matter. Use students' interests. Generate students' interests. Never go through the meaningless motion of "covering" material apart from students' involvement and learning.
- Never use shame or humiliation.
- Never scream or harangue.
- Never get caught in escalating punishments to force compliance.
- Listen, hear, remember, and use students' ideas.
- Model cooperation with all other adults in the building.

- Respect students' expressions of ideas.
- Demonstrate empathy for students' expressions of feelings.
- Identify student pain, sickness, and abuse, and follow up with people who can help them.
- Redefine the concept of a hero. Show how people who work things out are great.
- Teach students peer mediation. Do not expect students to learn from failing; repeated failure leads only to more frustration and giving up.
- Devise activities at which students can succeed; success engenders further effort.
- Be a source of constant encouragement by finding good parts of all students' work.
- Defuse, sidestep, redirect all challenges to your authority. Never confront anyone, particularly in public.
- Use cooperative learning frequently.
- Create an extended family in the classroom.
- Use particular subject matters as the way to have "fights": science "fights" about rival explanations, math "fights" about different solutions, social studies "fights" about what really happened.
- Never ask students for private information publicly.
- Don't try to control by calling on children who are not paying attention and embarrassing them.
- Demonstrate respect for parents in the presence of their children.

The list of do's and don'ts can be shortened by simply remembering that everyone needs to be treated with respect and courtesy. Will all these behaviors ensure that violence will be kept out of the school? No. The effect of these and other gentle, respectful behaviors is that schools will cut down on the degree to which they contribute to problems of violence and not exacerbate the violent culture children and youth bring from society into the school.

Star teachers see their jobs as helping to create safe havens where, for a good part of every day, the madness of violence will not intrude and their children will experience freedom from fear. Some other teachers do not have this job concept at all—they simply believe that because violence *should* not occur, it *should* not be in school and therefore *should* not be part of the teacher's day-to-day work. Beginning with these opposite views—stars looking at the world as it is and others seeing it in terms of some idealized fantasy—the two groups come to perform entirely different teaching jobs. Stars engage in gentle teaching aimed at making learning intrinsic and students accountable, while the

others implement top-down management models the youngsters are bound to resist and conquer by noncompliance.

Only those who have the self-confidence and strength to function in peaceful ways in volatile and potentially violent situations need apply. Many frail, elderly, female middle school teachers succeed every day while macho, male, ex-football heroes are driven out. Teacher strength is an inner quality demonstrated by an ability to share authority with children and youth whom most people are unwilling to trust.

### **When Teachers Face Themselves**

To some degree, all of us are socialized to regard our culture group as superior to others. Our group may be based on race, religion, language, sex, class, or all of the above. We are likely to overlay these notions of better or worse groups with factors such as age, appearance, or the lack of apparent handicaps. To grow up in American society as well as others is to be carefully taught prejudices in favor of some kinds of people and against others.

The first step for teachers-to-be is a thorough self-analysis of the content of their prejudices. Which are the “superior” people(s) and what are their attitudes? Which are the “inferior” people(s) and what are their attributes? This analysis will take a long period of soul-searching. For those who go into denial (“I’m not a prejudiced person”), there’s always the possibility they may never get beyond this first step. If so, they should not be allowed near children or youth.

The second step is to seek answers to the question of source: How did I learn or come to believe these things? Who taught them to me? When? Under what conditions? How much a part of my daily life are these beliefs? This second phase will be illuminating as one considers his or her biography and the significant others who have shaped his or her perceptions.

Step three of the self-analysis becomes even more interesting. In what ways do I benefit or suffer from my prejudices? For example, as a white male I may benefit from lower health insurance rates at the expense of others. I may also suffer from a loss of many valuable interactions by cutting myself off from individuals I perceive as unworthy of friendship. This phase is an especially critical step, because it reveals the myriad ways in which our daily living is affected by our prejudices.

Step four is to consider how our prejudices may be affecting the many issues surrounding what we believe about schools, children, and how they learn best. Do we believe in a hierarchy of native intelligence related to race? Are females capable of learning math and science? Why are almost all superintendents male? Should a deaf person be licensed to teach? Can high school dropouts who are parents really serve as role models?

Step five is the phase in which we lay out a plan explicating what we plan to do about our prejudices. How do we propose to check them, unlearn them, counteract them, and get beyond them?

These five steps are, of course, not taught in traditional teacher-education programs. Neither are they required by state bureaus of teacher licensure. Indeed, it is now possible to write to any of the fifty state departments of education stating, "I don't believe black children can ever be taught as much as white children," and still receive a teacher's license, provided one has completed the required coursework and passed a basic skills test.

For beginning teachers to succeed with children in poverty from diverse cultural backgrounds, they must successfully complete the five steps above. Middle-class suburban children also need teachers who have faced themselves and their own biases, but in the multicultural, urban schools the teacher must pass the most severe test. In urban schools, interacting successfully with children or youth from all groups is not an academic textbook exercise but a face-to-face interaction. Although the effects of a prejudiced teacher on children are everywhere detrimental and to be avoided, a culturally incompetent teacher who might survive in a small town or suburb will not last a day in an urban situation, except as a failure or burnout.

As if this level of self-understanding were not sufficiently difficult to attain, there are still other self-tests beginners need to administer. These involve the beginning teacher asking what he or she believes about cultural diversity and its role in teaching, learning, and school curriculum.

### **Only Decent People Can Be Prepared to Teach**

The question is what "decent" means. As I interact with star teachers and try to understand their ideology, it is clear to me that they live what they believe. It is not possible to list their beliefs and commitments apart from their behaviors. Just as the functions they perform as teachers cannot be understood apart from their undergirding ideology, the converse is also true.

The problem is that most people who select future teachers, either to train or to hire, do not use the definition of "decent" that is represented by star teachers: they simply use their own views of the world. When I reflect on what star teachers have told me, their basic decency is reflected by, but not limited to, the following attributes.

- They tend to be nonjudgmental. As they interact with children and adults in schools, their first thought is not to decide the goodness or badness of things but to understand events and communications.

- They are not moralistic. They don't believe that preaching is teaching.
- They are not easily shocked even by horrific events. They tend to ask themselves, "What can I do about this?" and if they think they can help, they do; otherwise they get on with their work and their lives.
- They not only listen, they hear. They not only hear, they seek to understand. They regard listening to children, parents, or anyone involved in the school community as a potential source of useful information.
- They recognize they have feelings of hate, prejudice, and bias and strive to overcome them.
- Teachers have a clear sense of their own ethnic and cultural identities.
- Teachers are culturally competent; they include diverse cultural perspectives in their classroom programs.
- They do not see themselves as saviors who have come to rescue their schools. They don't really expect their schools to change much.
- They do not see themselves as being alone. They network.
- They see themselves as "winning" even though they know their total influence on their students is much less than that of the total society, neighborhood, and gang.
- They visit parents in their homes or in neighborhood places away from school.
- They enjoy their interactions with children and youth so much they are willing to put up with irrational demands of the school system.
- They think their primary impact on their students is that they've made them more humane or less frustrated, or raised their self-esteem.
- They derive all types of satisfactions and meet all kinds of needs by teaching children or youth in poverty. The one exception is power. They meet no power needs whatever by functioning as teachers.

This is not a summary of what makes stars "decent." These are simply a few manifestations of their decency. It seems strange that while so many reasonable people understand that it takes decent people for teacher education to "take," we continue to select and prepare people for this sensitive occupation by examining only their grades and test scores. States have established that a driver's license is a privilege, not a right. Might this concept be extended to the process of licensing teachers?



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## Notes

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# Index

educational HORIZONS®, Vol. 86, Fall 2007–Summer 2008

- 
- Fall 2007, No. 1, 1–60**  
**Winter 2008, No. 2, 61–120**  
**Spring 2008, No. 3, 121–180**  
**Summer 2008, No. 4, 181–246**
- 
- America's Big Four Electronic  
     Dictionaries and Their Looming  
     Competition, 188  
 Bathon, Justin M., 75  
 Belief in a Magic Wand: The Case of  
     Teacher Socialization, 14  
 Carpenter, Wade A., 10, 69, 134  
 Clabaugh, Gary K., 6, 129, 198  
 Classification Error in Schooling  
     Practice: The Impact of the "False  
     Positive," 193  
 Cohen, David K., 19  
 "Collateral Damage" in Schooling  
     Practice, 2  
 Comparative Analysis of Educational  
     Systems of American and Japanese  
     Schools: Views and Visions, 99  
*Conditions for Admission, The: Access,  
     Equity, and the Social Contract of  
     Public Universities* (book review),  
     182  
 Constructivism: Its Theoretical  
     Underpinnings, Variations, and  
     Implications for Classroom  
     Instruction, 161  
 Continuing the Talk about American  
     Education: A Memo to My Friend, 112  
 Cyber Charter Schools: Evolution,  
     Issues, and Opportunities in Funding  
     and Localized Oversight, 142  
 Duerr, Laura L., 173  
 Education or Indoctrination: Is There a  
     Difference?, 6  
 Ellis, Kathleen, 142  
*Fool's Gold: Why the Internet Is No  
     Substitute for a Library* (book  
     review), 185  
 Fuhrman, Susan H., 19  
 Future of Progressive Education, The, 153  
 Gaither, Milton, 226  
 Geisinger, Kurt F., 182  
 Gentle Teaching in a Violent Society,  
     238  
 Globalization and World-Class Schools,  
     45  
 Grand Inquisitor/Educational Leader,  
     The: Duty vs. Character, 62  
 Great American Schools: The Power of  
     Culture and Passion, 35  
 Gunzelmann, Betsy, 85  
 Guskey, Thomas R., 29  
 Haberman, Martin, 238  
 Hayes, William, 153  
 Hidden Assumptions, Attitudes, and  
     Procedures in Failing Schools, 85  
 Illogic in School Reform, 122  
 Interdisciplinary Instruction, 173  
 Jung, Eunjoo, 112  
 Leadership in the Age of Accountability,  
     29  
 McCarthy, Martha M., 75  
 Meaningful Educational Opportunity: A  
     Vital and Viable Mission for NCLB, 203

- Mill, David H., 185  
 Milner, Joseph O., 45  
 Morrison, Kristan A., 14  
 Mosher, Fritz, 19  
 Noonan, Michael A., 139  
 Oliphant, Robert, 188  
 Other Side of August 5, The, 69  
 Other Side of George W., The, 10  
 Other Side of Inclusion, The, 134  
 "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," The: The  
 Necessity of Dealing with Problems  
 in Students' Lives, 53  
 Rebell, Michael A., 203  
 Research That Policy Needs, The, 19  
 Reynolds, Patricia R., 53  
 Rozycki, Edward G., 2, 62, 122, 193  
 Student Expression: The Uncertain  
 Future, 75  
 Teacher Power! Providing Support,  
 Restoring Respect, Ending  
 Humiliation, 198  
 Thinking Critically about "Critical  
 Thinking," 129  
 When Special Education as We Know  
 It Ends—What, If Anything, Will  
 Replace It?, 139  
 Why Homeschooling Happened, 226  
 Wiczorek, Craig C., 99  
 Wilson, Louise, 35  
 Wolff, Jessica R., 203  
 Yilmaz, Kaya, 161

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