

# The Pedagogy of Poverty Versus Good Teaching

It will be formidably difficult to institutionalize new forms of pedagogy for the children of poverty, but it is worthwhile to define and describe such alternatives.

**By Martin Haberman**

Why is a “minor” issue like improving the quality of urban teaching generally overlooked by the popular reform and restructuring strategies? There are several possibilities. First, we assume that we know what teaching is, that others know what it is, that we are discussing the same “thing” when we use the word, and that we would all know good teaching if we saw it. Second, we believe that, since most teachers cannot be changed anyway, there must be other, more potent, teacher-proof strategies for change. Third, why bother



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with teaching if research shows that achievement test scores of poor and minority youngsters are affected primarily by their socioeconomic class; affected somewhat by Head Start, school integration, and having a “strong” principal; and affected almost not at all by the quality of their teachers?

## THE PEDAGOGY OF POVERTY

An observer of urban classrooms can find examples of almost every form of pedagogy: direct instruction, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, individualized instruction, computer-assisted learning, behavior modification, the use of student contracts, media-assisted instruction, scientific inquiry, lecture/discussion, tutoring by specialists or volunteers, and even the use of problem-solving units common in progressive education. In spite of this broad range of options, however, there is a typical form of teaching that has become accepted as basic. Indeed, this basic urban style, which encompasses a body of specific teacher acts, seems to have grown stronger each year since I first noted it in 1958. A teacher in an urban school of the 1990s who did *not* engage in these basic acts as the primary means of instruction would be regarded as deviant. In most urban schools, not performing these acts for most of each day would be considered *prima facie* evidence of not teaching.



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The teaching acts that constitute the core functions of urban teaching are:

- Giving information,
- Asking questions,
- Giving directions,
- Making assignments,
- Monitoring seatwork,
- Reviewing assignments,
- Giving tests,
- Reviewing tests,
- Assigning homework,
- Reviewing homework,
- Settling disputes,
- Punishing noncompliance,
- Marking papers, and
- Giving grades.



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This basic menu of urban teacher functions characterizes all levels and subjects. A primary teacher might “give information” by reading a story to children, while a high school teacher might read to the class from a biology text. (Interestingly, both offer similar reasons: “The students can’t read for themselves,” and “They enjoy being read to.”) Taken separately, there may be nothing wrong with these activities. There are occasions

when any one of the 14 acts might have a beneficial effect. Taken together and performed to the systematic exclusion of other acts, they have become the pedagogical coin of the realm in urban schools. They constitute the pedagogy of poverty — not merely what teachers do and what youngsters expect but, for different reasons, what parents, the community, and the general public assume teaching to be.

Ancillary to this system is a set of out-of-class teacher acts that include keeping records, conducting parent conferences, attending staff meetings, and carrying out assorted school duties. While these out-of-class functions are not directly instructional, they are performed in ways that support the pedagogy of poverty. Since this analysis deals with the direct interactions characteristic of urban teachers and their students, I will limit myself to a brief comment about how each of these out-of-class functions is typically conceptualized and performed in urban settings.

- Record-keeping is the systematic maintenance of a paper trail to protect the school against any future legal action by its clients. Special classes, referrals, test scores, disciplinary actions, and analyses by specialists must be carefully recorded. This slant is the reason that teachers are commonly prejudiced rather than informed by reading student records; yet the system regards their upkeep as vital. (In teacher preparation, neophytes are actually taught that student records will reveal such valuable information as students’ interests!)
- Parent conferences give parents who are perceived as poorly educated or otherwise inadequate a chance to have things explained to them.
- Staff meetings give administrators opportunities to explain things to teachers.
- Assorted school duties are essentially police or monitoring activities that would be better performed by hired guards.

The pedagogy of poverty appeals to several constituencies:

1. It appeals to those who themselves did not do well in schools. People who have been brutalized are usually not rich sources of compassion. And those who have failed or done poorly in school do not typically take personal responsibility for that failure. They generally find it easier to believe that they would have succeeded if only somebody had forced them to learn.
2. It appeals to those who rely on common sense rather than on thoughtful analysis. It is easy to criticize humane and developmental teaching aimed at educating a free people as mere “permissiveness,” and it is well known that “permissiveness” is the root cause of our nation’s educational problems.
3. It appeals to those who fear minorities and the poor. Bigots typically become obsessed with the need for control.
4. It appeals to those who have low expectations for minorities and the poor. People with limited vision frequently see value in limited and limiting forms of pedagogy. They

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believe that at-risk students are served best by a directive, controlling pedagogy.

5. It appeals to those who do not know the full range of pedagogical options available. This group includes most school administrators, most business and political reformers, and many teachers.

There are essentially four syllogisms that undergird the pedagogy of poverty. Their “logic” runs something like this.

1. Teaching is what teachers do.  
Learning is what students do.  
Therefore, students and teachers are engaged in different activities.
2. Teachers are in charge and responsible. Students are those who still need to develop appropriate behavior. Therefore, when students follow teachers’ directions, appropriate behavior is being taught and learned.
3. Students represent a wide range of individual differences. Many students have handicapping conditions and lead debilitating home lives. Therefore, ranking of some sort is inevitable; some students will end up at the bottom of the class while others will finish at the top.
4. Basic skills are a prerequisite for learning and living. Students are not necessarily interested in basic skills. Therefore, directive pedagogy must be used to ensure that youngsters are compelled to learn their basic skills

#### REFORM AND THE PEDAGOGY OF POVERTY

Unfortunately, the pedagogy of poverty does not work. Youngsters achieve neither minimum levels of life skills nor what they are capable of learning. The classroom atmosphere created by constant teacher direction and student compliance seethes with passive resentment that sometimes bubbles up into overt resistance. Teachers burn out because of the emotional and physical energy that they must expend to maintain their authority every hour of every day. The pedagogy of poverty requires that teachers who begin their careers intending to be helpers, models, guides, stimulators, and caring



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sources of encouragement transform themselves into directive authoritarians in order to function in urban schools. But people who choose to become teachers do not do so because at some point they decided, “I want to be able to tell people what to do all day and then make them do it!” This gap between expectations and reality means that there is a pervasive, fundamental, irreconcilable difference between the motivation of those who select themselves to become teachers and the demands of urban teaching.

For the reformers who seek higher scores on achievement tests, the pedagogy of poverty is a source of continual frustration. The clear-cut need to “make” students learn is so obviously vital to the common good and to the students themselves that surely (it is believed) there must be a way to force students to work hard enough to vindicate the methodology. Simply stated, we act as if it is not the pedagogy that must be fitted to the students but the students who must accept an untouchable method.

In reality, the pedagogy of poverty is not a professional methodology at all. It is not supported by research, by theory, or by the best practice of superior urban teachers. It is actually certain ritualistic acts that, much like the ceremonies performed by religious functionaries, have come to be conducted for their intrinsic value rather than to foster learning.

There are those who contend that the pedagogy of poverty would work if only the youngsters accepted it and worked at it. “Ay, there’s the rub!” Students in urban schools overwhelmingly *do* accept the pedagogy of poverty, and they *do* work at it! Indeed, any teacher who believes that he or she can take on an urban teaching assignment and ignore the pedagogy of poverty will be quickly crushed by the students themselves. Examples abound of inexperienced teachers who seek to involve students in genuine learning activities and are met with apathy or bedlam, while older hands who announce, “Take out your dictionaries and start to copy the words that begin with *b*,” are regarded with compliance or silence.

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ing their expectations beyond an emphasis on basic skills to the teaching of critical thinking, problem solving, and even creativity. But if the pedagogy of poverty will not force the learning of low-level skills, how can it be used to compel genuine thinking? Heretofore, reformers have promulgated change strategies that deal with the level of funding, the role of the principal, parent involvement, decentralization, site-based management, choice, and other organizational and policy reforms. At some point, they must reconsider the issue of pedagogy. If the actual mode of instruction expected by school administrators

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and teachers and demanded by students and their parents continues to be the present one, then reform will continue to deal with all but the central issue: How and what are students taught?

The pedagogy of poverty is sufficiently powerful to undermine the implementation of any reform effort because it determines the way pupils spend their time, the nature of the behaviors they practice, and the bases of their self-concepts as learners. Essentially, it is a pedagogy in which learners can “succeed” without becoming either involved or thoughtful.

#### **THE NATURE OF URBAN CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

When he accepted the 1990 New York City Teacher of the Year Award, John Taylor Gatto stated that no school reform will work that does not provide children time to grow up or that simply forces them to deal with abstractions. Without blaming the victims, he described his students as lacking curiosity (having “evanescent attention”), being indifferent to the adult world, and having a poor sense of the future. He further characterized them as ahistorical, cruel and lacking in compassion, uneasy with intimacy and candor, materialistic, dependent, and passive — although they frequently mask the last two traits with a surface bravado.

Anyone who would propose specific forms of teaching as alternatives to the pedagogy of poverty must recognize that Gatto’s description of his students is only the starting point. These are the attributes that have been en-



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hanced and elicited by an authoritarian pedagogy and do not represent students’ true or ultimate natures. Young people can become more and different, but they must be taught how. This means to me that two conditions must pertain before there can be a serious alternative to the pedagogy of poverty: The whole school faculty and school community — not the individual teacher — must be the unit of change; and there must be patience and persistence of application, since students can be expected to resist changes to a system they can predict and know how to control. Having learned to navigate in urban schools based on the pedagogy of poverty, students will not readily abandon all their know-how to take on willy-nilly some new and uncertain system that they may not be able to control.

For any analysis of pedagogical reform to have meaning in urban schools, it’s necessary to understand something of the dynamics of the teacher/student interactions in those schools. The authoritarian and directive nature of the pedagogy of poverty is somewhat deceptive about who is really in charge. Teachers seem to be in charge, in that they direct students to work on particular tasks, allot time, dispense materials, and choose the means of evaluation to be used. It is assumed by many that having control over such factors makes teacher “decision makers” who somehow shape the behavior of their students.

But below this façade of control is another, more powerful level on which students actually control, manage, and shape the behavior of their teachers. Students reward teachers by complying. They punish by resisting. In this way, students mislead teachers into believing that some things “work” while other things do not. By this dynamic, urban children and youth effectively negate the values promoted in their teachers’ teacher education and undermine the nonauthoritarian predispositions that led their teachers to enter the field. And yet, most teachers are not particularly sensitive to being manipulated by students. They believe they are in control and are responding to “student needs,” when, in fact, they are more like hostages responding to the students’ overt or tacit threats of noncompliance and, ultimately, disruption.

It cannot be emphasized enough that, in the real world, urban teachers are never de-

defined as incompetent because their “deprived,” “disadvantaged,” “abused,” “low-income” students are not learning. Instead, urban teachers are castigated because they cannot elicit compliance. Once schools made teacher competence synonymous with student control, it was inevitable that students would sense who was really in charge.

The students’ stake in maintaining the pedagogy of poverty is of the strongest possible kind: It absolves them of responsibility for learning and puts the burden on the teachers, who must be accountable for *making* them learn. In their own unknowing but crafty way, students do not want to trade a system in which they can make their teachers ineffective for one in which they would themselves become accountable and responsible for what they learn. It would be risky for students to swap a “try and make me” system for one that says, “Let’s see how well and how much you really can do.”

Recognizing the formidable difficulty of institutionalizing other forms of pedagogy, it is still worthwhile to define and describe such alternative forms. The few urban schools that serve as models of student learning have teachers who maintain control by establishing trust and involving their students in meaningful activities rather than by imposing some neat system of classroom discipline. For genuinely effective urban teachers, discipline and control are primarily a *consequence* of their teaching and not a *prerequisite* condition of learning. Control, internal or imposed, is a continuous fact of life in urban classrooms — but, for these teachers, it is completely interrelated with the learning activity at hand.

### GOOD TEACHING

Is it possible to describe a teaching approach that can serve as an alternative to the pedagogy of poverty? I believe that there is a core of teacher acts that defines the pedagogy one finds in urban schools that have been recognized as exemplary. Unlike the directive teacher acts that constitute the pedagogy of poverty, however, these tend to be indirect activities that frequently involve the creation of a learning environment. These teaching behaviors tend to be evident more in what the students are doing than in the observable actions of the teacher. Indeed, teachers may appear to be doing little and at times may, to the



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unsophisticated visitor, seem to be merely observers. Good teaching transcends the particular grade or subject and even the need for lessons with specific purposes (Raths 1971).

*Whenever students are involved with issues they regard as vital concerns, good teaching is going on.* In effective schools, the endless “problems” — the censoring of a school newspaper, an issue of school safety, a racial flare-up, the dress code — are opportunities for important learning. In good schools, problems are not viewed as occasions to impose more rules and tighter management from above. Far from being viewed as obstacles to the “normal” school routine, difficult events and issues are transformed into the very stuff of the curriculum. Schooling is living, not preparation for living. And living is a constant messing with problems that seem to resist solution.

*Whenever students are involved with explanations of human differences, good teaching is going on.* As students proceed through school, they should be developing ever greater understanding of human differences. Why are there rich people and poor people, abled and disabled, urban and rural, multilingual and monolingual, highly educated and poorly educated? Differences in race, culture, religion, ethnicity, and gender are issues that children and youths reconsider constantly in an effort to make sense of the world, its relationships, and their place in it. This is not “social studies.” All aspects of the curriculum should deepen students’ basic understandings of these persistent facts of life.

*Whenever students are being helped to see major concepts, big ideas, and general principles and are not merely engaged in the pursuit of isolated facts, good teaching is going on.* At all levels and in all subjects, key concepts can be made meaningful and relevant. Students cannot be successful graduates without having at some point been exposed to the various forms of knowledge. Historians deal with the nature of sources; artists, with texture, color, and design. A fundamental goal of education is to instill in students the ability to use various and competing ways of understanding the uni-

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verse. Knowing how to spell is not enough.

*Whenever students are involved in planning what they will be doing, it is likely that good teaching is going on.* This planning involves real choices and not such simple preferences as what crayon to use or the order in which a set of topics will be discussed. Students may be asked to select a topic for study, to decide what resources they will need, or to plan how they will present their findings to others. People learn to make informed choices by actually making informed choices. Following directions — even perfectly — does not prepare people to make choices and to deal with the consequences of those choices.

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*Whenever students are involved with applying ideals such as fairness, equity, or justice to their world, it is likely that good teaching is going on.* Students of any age can, at some level, try to apply great ideals to their everyday lives. The environment, war, human relationships, and health care are merely a few examples of issues that students can be thinking about. Determining what should be done about particular matters and defending their ideas publicly gives students experience in developing principles to live by. Character is built by students who have had practice at comparing ideals with reality in their own lives and in the lives of those around them.

*Whenever students are actively involved, it is likely that good teaching is going on.* Doing an experiment is infinitely better than watching one or reading about one. Participating as a reporter, a role player, or an actor can be educational. Constructing things can be a vital activity. We need graduates who have learned to take action in their own behalf and in behalf of others.

*Whenever students are directly involved in a real-life experience, it is likely that good teaching is going on.* Field trips, interactions with resource people, and work and life experiences are all potentially vital material for analysis. Firsthand experience is potentially more educational than vicarious activity, *provided* it is combined with reflection.

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*ing is going on.* Students benefit from exposure to cultural as well as intellectual heterogeneity, and they learn from one another. Divergent questioning strategies, multiple assignments in the same class, activities that allow for alternative responses and solutions all contribute to learning. Grouping in schools is frequently based on artificial criteria that are not used in life. Grouping can either limit or enhance students' self-concept and self-esteem and thus has a powerful effect on future learning.

*Whenever students are asked to think about an idea in a way that questions common sense or a widely accepted assumption, that relates new ideas to ones learned previously, or that applies an idea to the problems of living, then there is a chance that good teaching is going on.* Students are taught to compare, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, generalize, and specify in the process of developing thinking skills. The effort to educate thoughtful people should be guided by school activities that involve thought. The acquisition of information — even of skills — without the ability to think is an insufficient foundation for later life.

*Whenever students are involved in redoing, polishing, or perfecting their work, it is likely that good teaching is going on.* It is in the act of review, particularly review of one's own work, that important learning occurs. This technique may involve an art project or a science experiment as well as a piece of writing. The successful completion of anything worthwhile rarely occurs in a single trial. Students can learn that doing things over is not punishment but an opportunity to excel.

*Whenever teachers involve students with the technology of information access, good teaching is going on.* Teachers, texts, and libraries as they now exist will not be sufficient in the future. Computer literacy — beyond word processing — is a vital need. As James Mecklenburger points out, “Electronic learning must play a more important part in the mix, even at the expense of customary practices. Today, students and educators alike can create, receive, collect, and share data, text, images, and sounds on myriad topics in ways more stimulating, richer, and more timely than ever before” (1990: 108).

*Whenever students are involved in reflecting on their own lives and how they have come to believe and feel as they do, good teaching is going on.* Autobiography can be the basis of an exceed-

ingly powerful pedagogy — one that is largely discarded after early childhood education. When critics dismiss my characterization of the pedagogy of poverty as an exaggeration, I am reminded of an immense sign hanging in an urban high school that has devoted itself totally to raising test scores: “We dispense knowledge. Bring your own container.” This approach is the opposite of good teaching, which is the process of building environments, providing experiences, and then eliciting responses that can be reflected on. Autobiographical activities are readily extended into studies of family, neighborhood, and community. What could be more fundamental to subsequent learning than self-definition? Urban schools, in the way they narrowly structure the role of the teacher and restrict the content to be taught, too frequently repudiate the students and their home lives. The vision of good teaching as a process of “drawing out” rather than “stuffing in” is supported by diverse philosophies, including, most recently, feminist theories of the teaching/learning process (Grumet 1988: 99).

#### THE REWARDS OF NOT CHANGING

Taken individually, any of these indicators of good teaching is not a sufficient basis for proposing reform. We all know teachers who have done some of these things — as well as other, better things — for years. Taken together and practiced schoolwide and persistently, however, these suggestions can begin to create an alternative to the pedagogy of poverty.

Unfortunately, we must recognize that it may no longer be possible to give up the present authoritarianism. The incentives for the various constituencies involved may well have conditioned them to derive strong benefits from the pedagogy of poverty and to see only unknown risk in the options.

In the present system, teachers are accountable only for engaging in the limited set of behaviors commonly regarded as acts of teaching in urban schools — that is, the pedagogy of poverty. Students can be held accountable only for complying with precisely what they have specifically and carefully been directed to do. Administrators can be held accountable only for maintaining safe buildings; parents, only for knowing where their children are. Each constituency defines its



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own responsibilities as narrowly as possible to guarantee itself “success” and leave to others the broad and difficult responsibility for integrating students’ total educations.

Who is responsible for seeing that students derive meaning and apply what they have learned from this fragmented, highly specialized, overly directive schooling? It is not an accident that the present system encourages each constituency to blame another for the system’s failure. My argument here is that reforms will “take” only if they are supported by a system of pedagogy that has never been tried in any widespread, systematic, long-term way. What prevents its implementation is the resistance of the constituencies involved — constituencies that have a stake in maintaining their present roles, since they are, in effect, unaccountable for educating skilled, thoughtful citizens.

Continuing to define nonthinking, underdeveloped, unemployable youngsters as “adults” or “citizens” simply because they are high school graduates or passers of the General Education Development (GED) examination is irresponsible. Education will be seriously reformed only after we move it from a matter of “importance” to a matter of “life and death,” both for society and for the individuals themselves. Graduates who lack basic skills may be unemployable and represent a personal and societal tragedy. However, graduates who possess basic skills but are partially informed, unable to think, and incapable of making moral choices are downright dangerous. Before we can *make* workers, we must first *make* people. But people are not *made* — they are conserved and grown. **K**

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