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## COMMENTARY

# How Education Reform Traps Poor Children

By **Alfie Kohn**

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

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

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

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

Earlier this year, Natalie Hopkinson, an African-American writer, put it this way in an article on theRoot.com called **"The McEducation of the Negro"**: "In the name of reform ... education—for those 'failing' urban kids, anyway—is about learning the rules and following directions. Not critical thinking. Not creativity. It's about how to correctly eliminate three out of four bubbles."

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

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

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

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

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

Well before his brief tenure last year as New Jersey's commissioner of education, Bret Schundler (then the mayor of Jersey City, N.J.) expressed enthusiasm about the sort of

teaching that involves repetitive drill and “doesn’t allow children not to answer.” This approach is “bringing a lot of value-added for our children,” he enthused in *The New York Times Magazine*. Does his use of the word “our” mean that he would send his own kids to that kind of school? Well, no. “Those schools are best for certain children,” he explained.

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

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

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

Rather than viewing the pedagogy of poverty as a disgrace, however, many of the charter schools championed by the new reformers have concentrated on perfecting and intensifying techniques to keep children “on task” and compel them to follow directions. (Interestingly, their carrot-and-stick methods mirror those used by policymakers to control educators.) Bunches of eager, mostly white, college students are invited to drop by for a couple of years to lend their energy to this dubious enterprise.

Is racism to blame here? Or could it be that, at its core, the corporate version of “school reform” was never intended to promote thinking—let alone interest in learning—but merely to improve test results? That pressure is highest in the inner cities, where the scores are lowest. And indeed the pedagogy of poverty can sometimes “work” to raise those scores, but at a huge price. Because the tests measure what matters least, it’s possible for the

accountability movement to simultaneously *narrow the test-score gap and widen the learning gap*.

According to Deborah Meier, the founder of extraordinary schools in New York City and Boston: "Only secretly rebellious teachers have ever done right by our least advantaged kids." To do right by them in the open, we would need structural changes that make the best kind of teaching available to the kids who need it most.

And we know it can work—which is to say, the pedagogy of poverty is not what's best for the poor. Even back in 1992, [a three-year study](#) (published by the U.S. Department of Education) of 140 low-income elementary classrooms found that students whose teachers emphasized "meaning and understanding" flourished. The researchers concluded by decisively rejecting as unhelpful "schooling for the children of poverty ... [that] emphasizes basic skills, sequential curricula, and tight control of instruction by the teacher."

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

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

A British educator named David Gribble was once speaking in favor of the kind of education that honors children's interests and helps them think deeply about questions that matter. Of course, he added, that sort of education is appropriate for affluent children. For disadvantaged children, on the other hand, it is ... *essential*.

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