

The Miseducation of Urban Youth

Robin Lee, Ed.D.
California State University, Long Beach

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“Macroeconomic mandates continually trump urban education and school reform” (p. 2).

Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement
(Anyon, 2005)

Baltimore Teacher Beaten by Student, Caught on Film.

Georgia 3rd-graders plotted attack on teacher, brought knife, handcuffs to school.

Student Punches, Kicks Teacher, Police Say.

Urban public schools and their teachers are clearly under siege. From increased standardization, privatization and testing, to a growing number of students whose needs are not being met by schools and society at large, urban public school teachers face a daunting task. Unfortunately, the problems facing our schools are a mystery to few. Growing poverty and social stratification along racial and class lines have severely impacted the access that low income African American and Latino students have; not only to quality education, but also to decent jobs, housing, and health care (Anyon, 2005; Noguera, 2004; Lipman, 2004). According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (2003), 44% of children attending schools in urban cities of large and midsize metropolitan areas are living in poverty. Students who attend schools that have higher levels of poverty are more likely to have lower test scores, higher absenteeism and suspension rates, and less qualified teachers (Obidah & Howard, 2005). As a result, many teachers either avoid teaching in these schools, transfer out of them as soon as possible or drop out of the profession altogether. In high poverty schools, an average of one-fifth of the entire teaching force changes each fall (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003).

No Child Left Behind

President George W. Bush’s 2001 proposal to restructure accountability standards for the nation’s (largely urban) public schools with the initiation of “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) represented a desire for immediate action and strong leadership. Supporters of NCLB felt they were doing the right thing for our children and our public schools. The “right thing” included increasing funding for schools that served the poor; ensuring that every child would be taught by highly qualified teachers; and, holding schools that receive federal funds accountable for raising achievement levels of every student by disaggregating their achievement data. As such, the latter suggested that the schools would no longer

be able to mask the failures of federal funds meant to target students of color, the poor, and students with disabilities.

Seven years after *No Child Left Behind* was enacted, the change that it promised has been slow and debilitating. In effect, *No Child Left Behind* has failed.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle in their 2006 review of NCLB noted that NCLB positions teachers as the sole critical players in improving student achievement while paying little attention to other causes of educational inequity. This view of teachers as the answer to all the ills of education distracts attention from other systemic factors, such as under-funding, racism, and poverty (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). In the same issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*, researcher Linda Darling-Hammond proposed specific measures that would help eliminate NCLB's hidden disincentives that encourage higher drop-out rates for lower achieving students (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Reforming Education in Detroit Public Schools

Increasing numbers of urban school districts are examining the structure of their schools and attempting to design improvement programs dictated to them by *No Child Left Behind*. Among those in the forefront of urban school reform is the Detroit Public Schools. Amidst pleas by city residents calling for the resignation of its scandal-riddled mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, and the staging of "Heal the City" rallies, the Detroit Public Schools recently released figures citing the District's high school graduation rate at 24.9%, the worst among the nation's largest 50 cities. As expected, Detroit Public School officials scrambled to combat these dismal achievement scores with planned sweeping changes throughout the District (Thomas, 2008).

In response to miserable student achievement and graduation rates, a proposed "Turn Around School Plan" was born, which slated for closure five of the district's high schools with plans to re-engineer them into small, independent academies. *No Child Left Behind* allows school districts to restructure schools that fail to meet standards for six or more years, including replacing staff.

One of the schools slated for closure is my alma mater – Frank Cody High School.

Detroit's proposal to restructure the lowest-performing public high schools represents a sense of urgency, and a desire for swift action and strong leadership. What is missing from this ambitious plan to restructure poor performing schools because of demographic shifts and low test scores is an equally ambitious, equally bold plan to improve the quality of instruction our students experience.

Resource Allocation and Teacher Quality

As a graduate of Frank Cody High School, and a former Detroit teacher, I assert that Detroit, like many other urban school districts in this country, has failed to see the larger picture. The political reality of urban school reform is inexorably tied to resource allocation and teacher quality.

While almost 75% of school districts in the United States have fewer than five schools, the largest 100 school districts enroll almost one-quarter of total public school students and average 158 schools each

(US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2003). Resources have been shown to vary across schools within these larger districts, driven, in part, by differences in students, teachers, or politics (Schwartz & Stiefel, 2004; Iatarola & Stiefel, 2003; Rubenstein, 1998; Betts, Rueben & Dannenberg, 2000). Thus, resource allocation within school districts is a key component of overall resource distribution. A 2006 report released by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2006) and signed by former Secretaries of Education Rod Paige and William Bennett, among many others, asserts that “even within school districts, there are often vast disparities between schools—disparities that generally favor schools with savvier leaders and wealthier parents” (p. 2). As such, school leaders fear that schools with fewer poor children, fewer minority children or fewer immigrants will be allocated more resources. Ultimately, since it is schools per se as much as districts that actually “produce” education, and since *No Child Left Behind* holds schools accountable for improving student academic performance, it is critical to move beyond district-level analyses to more accurately assess the resources available to students in their schools. This is the first step toward developing school finance policies that appropriately target resources to the schools with the neediest or costliest students.

In addition to financial allocations affecting the viability of urban public schools, scholarly research has shown that teacher quality matters more than class size, more than students' prior achievement, and more than students' socioeconomic background (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2005). Aligned with prior research on student success, researchers Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain (2005) cited the quality of instruction as the leading indicator of student achievement. Thus, scholarly research, independent analyses of Detroit Public Schools by experts, along with plain common sense, all suggest that the real issue before us is not who controls the budget but rather how well our teachers are teaching. Yet the current proposal “Turn Around School Plan” and the surrounding debate are entirely silent when it comes to what actually happens in the classroom. Detroit children, parents, and teachers deserve greater detail of Detroit’s vision of teaching and learning, along with specifics regarding whether and how the proposed restructuring will support innovative, effective instruction that allows our young people to reach their full potential as learners.

Substantive change will not be accomplished through the familiar and overused strategies of educational policy reform, such as mandating new curricula, threatening stricter accountability measures, or tinkering with collective bargaining agreements. It can be accomplished by re-engineering the classroom so that the work of school becomes more intellectually engaging for both students and teachers. In one recent study conducted by the University of Hawaii (2007), public school students spent just one percent of their class time asking thoughtful questions about the subject at hand. In contrast, students spent sixty percent of their time on passive learning activities—sitting quietly, completing worksheets that emphasized simple recall and basic understanding, and copying down information provided by the teacher. A teacher who values students' obedience more than their intellect, and a school system that encourages compliance rather than critical thinking, is not adequate preparation for participation in the higher education arena, nor the global landscape. We must transform our classrooms from places where teachers talk and students listen to centers of inquiry, where teachers inspire and students investigate. Going to school should be like going to work in a research lab. Students should have real responsibility; make important decisions; look for answers

when they need new information; experiment; take risks; learn from failures; and return home each day exhausted and exhilarated from their accomplishments. We should invest in training teachers to provide these sorts of learning experiences, and support them materially and administratively when they do.

Top-down educational reform gives teachers orders, standards and curriculum plans to divide the work, but none of these validates their yearning for meaningful work that makes a real difference with the children they serve. There has been far too little consideration of how proposed restructuring of urban schools would affect teachers and teaching. Those of us concerned with the education of urban youth should urge our leaders to spell out more fully whether and how the alternative structure would allow for more purposeful and more powerful investments in training teachers to deliver the rich and responsive curriculum our children deserve. No educational policy can effect substantive change in schools if it does not successfully galvanize teachers' efforts and intellects and invest in their continuous professional growth as educators.

Conclusion

When thinking of the underlying reasons for the intractable problems in our schools, and why our efforts at reform have so far fallen short, researcher Jean Anyon (2005) offers the claim that urban education reform is doomed to failure. Furthermore, Anyon asserts that the macroeconomic and sociopolitical contexts that create policies in school districts make it virtually impossible to improve schools in poor and low-income communities.

Anyon argues that two major forces—federal policies and metropolitan inequities—are the primary contributors to the conditions that plague public schools. This assertion challenges commonly held beliefs that the reason urban schools are failing is because the children are poor, the parents do not care, the teachers are ill prepared, and the funding is too meager.

By contrast, Professor Michael Eric Dyson offered this during a recent address to an audience of high-achieving youth, stating "in our day and age, you have to reach people where they are. You have to talk to young people in their own language and where they are" (Yarbrough, 2008).

The challenges faced in urban schools are deeply rooted in the ongoing struggle for racial, class and gender equity. Part of this struggle is tied to huge differences in class and involves making more equitable the distribution of resources. Another part of this struggle is tied to the rich diversity of children who attend urban schools and involves generating new ways of understanding, valuing, and genuinely incorporating into school-based practices the culture, language, beliefs, and experiences that these children bring to school. That is, to understand the mythology of urban youth in an educational context is to face the issues confronting our society at large. For these reasons, teachers and teaching is central to the debate of educational reform in addressing the future of urban youth.

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