

Deborah Meier

## Learning Not to Learn

Everybody in the family is okay except my brother. He bothers me.  
And when he runs into trouble of getting a whipping he really kills me.  
By hitting me real hard. And curses at me.

DANIEL WAS REPEATING first grade in a run-down Chicago school — big, dingy, half-lit rooms and old-fashioned screw-down desks. I was the fourth teacher he had had that fall, and before the year was over he would have many more. According to the school records he couldn't read or write and lacked "verbal ability." Yet how could one explain the above composition? During the reading of the primer available to that class (and 20 of these basal readers were the only books in that particular room of about 35 children) he would, it is true, stare blankly at every other word as though he had never before encountered it.

Daniel was a student in my first all-Negro class. He produced this story in the first week of my month's stay as his teacher. It was the beginning of an experience that was disturbing, fascinating, and revealing for me, for the same incongruities appeared over and over and over again—in schools with good physical conditions and up-to-date materials as well as in openly demoralized and uncared-for schools.

What was unexpected was the kind of written work that the children handed in. On one hand, I had rarely seen such uniform and neat handwriting. Eddie, for example, handed in an essay consisting of partial phrases copied at random from the blackboard:

Family

What you like to do

Plans for the weekend

How you sister uncle  
Brother see the ball

From top to bottom his paper was "flawless"—perfect spacing, neat lettering, good margins and no erasures or cross-outs. But also no communication!

On the other hand, I was struck time after time in my years of teaching by the honest perception and apt phraseology of the many "Daniels" in our ghetto schools. It would be misleading to imply that it was the "norm"—but the number of such papers seemed out of proportion to what I would expect to find even in upper-middle-class white schools (and more fluent than my own children usually produced at the same age). Yet such papers were never commented on by the teachers I met or the educators I had come across in my teacher training. Nor, in searching through rooms that I taught in for one- and two-day stands in Chicago's South Side ghetto school district did I see evidence that other teachers obtained such superior written material. Could I be mistaken? Was I reading things into this work because of my own feelings for the children? I was reassured, however, by the reaction of friends to the stories and poems I showed them and by eventually encountering other teachers with drawers full of similar "evidence."

I knew that these outpourings could not be explained merely as the result of inspired teaching. The following essays, for example, were obtained in an average second-grade class which I taught for only two days.

To help them "get going" I had put four "key" words on the board: *fight, child, night, and star*. But what I wanted, I stressed, was their own story, with or without these words. Neither spelling nor grammar counted, I assured them: "Tell me a story!" Gwendolyn produced the following:

in The night time The stars are bright.  
when I look out The window I saw a fight  
who do you think was fighting  
it was a child  
I did call my mother to stop The fight.  
when I went to school the next day  
I saw another fight  
I went to get The teacher but she  
could not come to stop The fight.  
The teacher had to work. She had  
no time for children so I stop The  
fight and the fight was over. The  
End.

With the same list of "key" words seven-year-old Norburke wrote:

My dady brought me some toys last night  
He went back out for more and had a fight.  
Then he saw a star going by.  
He saw a child runing to.  
He tried to call the child's Mother.  
But who will he call.  
so he saw a poilecman and tole  
him to take The child home  
but at first the child oh most  
cryed but when The poilecman said  
that he was going to take the child  
home the child did not cry.  
But when the child got home the  
child went sleep.  
Whil the star was passing by.  
Then Dady went back out to get  
me some more toys for me and I  
will play with them on christmas day.

The End

Emile wrote this short but effective version:

In the night I saw a child  
looking at a Star  
the Star was very far away  
from the little girl  
way far from her and the

first time She looked at it  
she was very happy  
and then I was happy too.

Cynthia, considered the slowest child in the room, retold instead, in her own words, a story once read to the class. (I have edited her very frequent letter reversals—*ilrg* for *girl*, *seh* for *she*.)

Ones ther was a girl who had a dog  
his name were black  
he ran away one day  
she was said and star to cry  
he mother came to her and say  
I seen your dog  
he is in the homes.  
Oh black Black, she said  
I like you so  
do not run away a gend  
she cry happy

On the verge of a highly literate language, struggling as all seven- and eight-year-olds do, with spelling, punctuation, grammar, and the sheer mechanics of handwriting, most of these second graders could tell an effective story and communicate a live experience. Still most were labeled "slow learners," a category the vast majority of black children fall into. This particular second-grade group told me that while they were not "the dummies," they weren't the "good" class either.

In later years when I worked as a regular teacher with pre-school and kindergarten children, who did not have to cope with technical problems of spelling and handwriting and with whom I developed a year-round relationship, the dictated stories I obtained were equally if not more impressive. There were some paralyzed and withdrawn children who had suffered damage that no normal school setting could undo. But few teachers or experts in the field seem aware of the resources of language, ideas, and concepts that even the withdrawn children possess.

A quiet four-year-old living with grandparents, the child of an unwed working mother, asked me to write this for his Father's Day card:

My grandfather is good.  
Because he's a generous father  
because his kids love him.  
That's why he's a generous father.

Walter, age four, frequently absent from school—the eldest of five children living in three crowded rooms with an aunt and a violent, often unemployed father—dictated to me:

I said to mother, "Rebecca, can I go to school?"

She said, "no." She say no more. I cried.  
Stevie no cry. Not Stevie. He go.  
I can't go. Cause I aint got no clean clothes.  
I'm no good. I stink.  
Everybody stink.

On another occasion, Walter came and asked me to write down this variation on a familiar child's complaint:

I'm afraid in the dark the bogey ghost  
going to take  
me out and throw me out the window.  
He's in the closet. He's in there now.  
He looks like my daddy.  
He throw me out the window cause some  
one wearing his clothes.

I told my mother, "going to get a gun and  
shoot that bogey ghost in the head."  
He's gone now. He's in the hospital now.  
He going to say there. He gone. Not in  
the house.

He gone, gone gone now. I shot him in the  
head.

I'm not scared in the dark anymore.  
I be superman and hit the dark in the head  
and I run away.  
I'll bust that bogey ghost.  
"Bogey ghost, I'll bust your head."

This "inarticulate" deprived child ended his very verbal tale with a grand flourish, smiling victoriously.

Passive, withdrawn Regina, just five years old, a compulsively neat and "unresponsive" five-year-old, tells articulately of her place in the family order:

My mother sometimes gets mad at the  
little kids,  
my sisters. Because they throws things out  
windows.

She says, "Stop! Stop throwing things out.  
You just do that, right now!"  
Then they jump jump on the bed. They  
act bad.

When I tell them to act right they act bad  
again.

My mother likes them. But she sometimes  
whips them.

She never whips me. She never gets mad  
at me.

Cause I never fight and never act bad.

THE IMPORTANCE of these stories (which are by no means exceptions but in fact run-of-the-mill examples) goes beyond their literary quality or their psychological suggestiveness. The single fact of their existence forced me to reevaluate certain theories which I had always taken for granted and which form the basis of most current approaches to Negro lower-class children and their educational problems. Were these, after all, the same children who, as we are told in popular magazines and journals of education, are non-verbal and lacking in adequate vocabularies, are defective in speech patterns and unable to speak in complete sentences, unable to relate an event in sequence and in need of structured drill in listening and noticing? Are these the children whom Shelley Umans, Ph. D. of Teachers College and Title II director for the New York Board of Education, is referring to when she says that reading is "based on oral language, and disadvantaged youngsters never learn the art of listening"? To the contrary, these youngsters expressed a precocious insight into what they saw and particularly what they heard.

Yet I knew that my surprising kindergarteners would soon be labeled retarded, slow learners, unteachables. Their skill would soon be manifested in school only by their unusual success in tormenting each other and the authorities. Why is it that they would soon appear so dumb, so maddeningly dumb, so completely incapable of handling the simplest school curricula?

What has been most appalling in my ex-

perience of big-city schools is not a Dickensian 19th-century cruelty (which does exist in places) but the pervasiveness of a daily low-key atmosphere of tension, anxiety, and fear even in schools and classes with decent, unbiased and intelligent teachers (and even in schools with large proportions of white children). The teachers are not monsters, and for sheer fortitude and dedication in the usual sense many are indeed impressive. Yet in ways I had not expected, the schools and teachers were more inadequate than I had dreamed, and the contrast between the potentialities that lower-class Negro children enter school with and their failure by the time they reach high school is staggering.

After the first six formative years of life, Negro and white children are only about a half year apart according to the usual testing devices. After three years of contact with our "common cultural heritage" and exposure to middle-class norms *in* the schools, the gap grows to one year. After six years it is more than two, and so on. The comparison between white and Negro boys is even more appalling. Negro boys become "literate" in the literal and traditional sense, but no more. They know the mechanics of how to read, but that crucial reading explosion which middle-class children undergo during early adolescence never occurs for them.

This increasing gap shows up even in IQ scores. While the scores of New York City's white children increased between the first and sixth grade, where they leveled off, Negro children's scores went steadily down after first grade. (The white poor, incidentally, show scoring patterns similar to those of the black poor.)

It is evident from all this that most of these children first come to school sufficiently fit to receive a decent education, highly experienced in the ways of their world, and able to articulate their experiences. They may be slightly behind in specific areas, but they have for their ages competent perceptual ability, skills, and linguistic know-how. They probably have

a disproportionately high rate of emotional and ego problems. But even the most "stable" children are dropping way behind their middle-class white counterparts, some of whom are quite disturbed themselves. Not all emotional problems, after all, need to be so completely transformed into learning blocks, and not all stability is conducive to learning.

This is not to deny that some of the Negro children's present psychological and environmental problems would not always be a handicap to developing their fullest intellectual powers. So long as the reasons for psychological problems remain, so long as their environment is difficult and exhausting, some handicaps will exist. What we need to ask is whether the school reinforces children's angers and self-hatred or alleviates them? Does the school require the child to use his limited energies to protect his ego from further assault, or does it leave him relatively free to use those energies creatively?

The children of lower-class homes are also no doubt handicapped by the intellectual shortcomings of their families—the lack of books and intellectual discussion at home, the absence of parents who could help with homework or explain the mysteries of science or literature. Perhaps the most serious intellectual shortcoming with which Negro children enter school is their failure to verbalize curiosity. They do not ply adults with incessant "whys." They do not expect answers. They do not assume that life does or should make sense. In contrast, middle-class, favored children often have an exaggerated notion of the extent to which the adults in their lives have all the answers and ultimately can control and make sense out of everything. Their disillusionment is guaranteed, but the extent to which they presume adult omnipotence and omniscience is educationally motivating. It means that they assume that there is a way of finding all things out.

It would seem obvious that the ghetto school should then go out of its way to welcome questions and to see that answers are

given. It should try harder than the average school to see that the small puzzling aspects of a child's environment are explored and explained. Within the four walls of the school surely we should never give children reason to fear being curious or admitting confusion.

**H**OW CAN WE EXPLAIN the fact that we create just the school environment that most exaggerates both the psychological and intellectual handicaps of lower-class children? Do we want to fail? Unlike some recent critics (whose views I often share), such as Herbert Kohl and Jonathan Kozol, I doubt whether a conscious or unconscious desire for failure explains why so many teachers are inadequate, nor do I believe that racial or class bias, sadism, or laziness are the only factors present. The evidence is considerable that, although I prefer their kind of failure, even teachers who are gentle, kind, and pro-black fail. From the very earliest introduction into the school system our traditional approach to education creates for lower-class children in general, and blacks in particular, an alienation so severe as to make the school and teacher a relatively useless educational instrument.

The child of Harlem comes to Kindergarten or Headstart with special fears that go beyond the usual separation anxieties. He knows first of all that his parents are afraid of the school, a fear they may express by timidity or belligerence. The discomfort of his mother or father will visibly increase as the teacher or school clerk scolds them for ineptness in following directions, inadequacy in providing the proper equipment, etc. If his parents are made uneasy and afraid, how can the child feel safe?

Even physically the middle-class child perceives things differently. The environment of the classroom is familiar to him. The teacher speaks in a familiar way and she understands his way of talking, even if he still talks baby talk. She is not puzzled by his habits or patterns of living and her value system coincides

rather closely with that of his own family. He knows as a result what he dare say in school and what should be withheld, knows it unconsciously since the rules of the game are those he has already adapted himself to.

When the lower-class child (and this holds true, more or less, for white or Negro) has difficulty understanding his teacher, he is generally led to believe that this is his fault. The teacher has difficulty understanding him—and she may even consciously avoid trying to understand him since she sees her task as altering his speech pattern, not adjusting to it. (And often she mistakes the immaturity of a four- or five-year-old's speech for some special ghetto language problem!) Her values and those of his family are often quite different, if not in violent collision, and so are the manners by which these values are expressed. Even if the teacher understands the child's view of life, she sees her first and foremost task in presenting him with a different and superior view.

One of the sophisticated long-range tasks of a good education is, of course, to introduce children to alternative approaches to life. But this long-range task is hardly made easier if the child feels, at the outset, that his teacher hopes to erase as much as possible of the memories, associations, and skills with which he comes to her. The teacher sees the play corner and the doll house not as centers of fantasy where a child can explore and reexamine his own experiences; but as places to practice his newly acquired proper habits. Thus she seeks to have him set the table properly, say "please" and "thank you," match place mats with forks and knives, learn proper phone manners, or appropriate ways to greet visitors. She may do this skillfully and introduce such "improvements" in a playful and imaginative way, thus believing that she avoids "imposing" upon a child's fantasies or explorations, or avoids implying censure toward his parents or their manners. But in fact, she is both imposing and censuring. For the play corner was intended to serve a child's

exploration of *his* life. Such an exploration, an imitation of what the child sees and hears, is a prerequisite for later objective examination. Thus the teacher warns him, by her impositions, that there is danger in letting slip a spontaneous expression. She is reminding him, even if gently, that this is not the place to deal with the meaning of what he actually sees or hears. If he does she will be embarrassed, confused, indignant, horrified, tell him he is "wrong" or "not nice," or perhaps pretend not to hear him at all. Of course, let us not forget, that very often she may also pinch him, shove him, or humiliate him to cover her own frustration or disgust.

No matter which way she does it, the child does not lose sight of the fact that his own world is despised by his teacher as a wrong model, a bad model, or at the very least, an irrelevant one.

The openly strict, no-nonsense teacher at least provides some easy-to-follow guidelines. She requires certain rote learning; she demands very defined classroom standards of behavior; she gives credit and blame evenly. By watching her movements for clues, by handling routines in standardized ways, and by knowing when it is safe to withdraw, a child can survive many years in such classrooms. He may not learn much, but he will not go to pieces either. The reforming, motherly type, anxious to like and be liked, poses greater dangers, especially to the very young child whom she most likely wants to teach. She entices. The child is eager for her attention, praise, and affection. He tries to remodel himself. The "answers" she wants from him—whether they be in the area of numbers, colors, health habits, or personal data—rarely make sense nor are they always consistent with his own view of reality. The more he wants or needs her approval, the more he finds this distressing and seeks some way of adapting himself. He begins to look for the answers in her face, becomes more sensitive to her moods, and gives up any attempt to understand either her logic or his own. The

easiest way to gain approval, if he can accomplish it, is to please her in areas of manners, style, and neatness. To avoid pain he learns to charm her, to con her with special techniques and looks, to manipulate her own desire to be liked.

In Kindergarten and to some degree in first grade, the minimal learning of rote rules, the dependence on superficial manners and neatness of lettering, and the ability to charm, may produce considerable success for some children. But as the child grows older and more is expected of him in terms of real school skills, this avenue provides fewer and fewer rewards. Most children soon put an end to the whole game, label themselves or the system "stupid," and drop out in one form or another.

The reforming early-childhood teacher protests. She says that "her children" really like her and learn "for" her. But years of experience as just such a teacher convinces me that children are remarkably skillful at playing our game. They hug, flatter, enthuse, and praise. But all the time they are dreading that day when we will ask that "innocent" question to test their academic ability. How they wish we would lay off that stuff. At the first sniff of a question they take on that glazed look so common in ghetto children that many teachers and observers assume to be brain damage of widespread proportions. What that glazed look says is, "Leave me alone. Don't meddle. Don't judge me where it counts. There is only so much I can deal with in this school."

The teacher repeats her question and they turn her off, they give any arbitrary and stupid answer that comes into their head, without concern for its sense or meaning. "I knew it was wrong all along, so who cares what the teacher says about it." Or they ponder, weigh, rethink, clench their fists, bite their lips, until the teacher capitulates and supplies the answer or calls on another. They watch her face for clues, or withdraw into a complete fantasy world. None of these techniques are

unique to ghetto schools, and the best description I ever read of them is John Holt's account of middle-class private schools. Yet in few places outside of lower-class schools will one find these techniques so refined and so universal as to replace all other kinds of learning. Nowhere else does a child depend less on his own "common sense," his own generalizations about life than in the ghetto classroom.

EDDIE WHO COPIED random words from the blackboard under the guise of doing an assignment on "My Family" may or may not be stupid. He had, after all, figured out some things his teacher cared about and complied on the level of handwriting, neat margins, and accurate copying. The teacher's criticism could only be leveled at the meaninglessness of his story. This could cause him no pain, however, because there had never been any intention to produce meaning. But suppose he had tried to? Suppose he had permitted the teacher to share something of his own life, his own perceptions?

"Now Stanley, over there," said a highly respected teacher to me as she figured out aloud which child I should tutor "stand up, Stanley. Thank you, dear. He's a sweet boy. He just cannot learn to read. He's bright enough, but can you blame him? His home life is impossible. Impossible. Look at how his mother dresses him. Stanley, did your mother pack you a lunch today? She's drunk, you know, half the time and there's a different father, if you know what I mean, every week." Stanley, an exceptionally alert, six-year-old, explained to me during later tutoring sessions, "My mother will teach me to read, you don't have to. I don't need to learn the alphabet, my mother will buy me one soon." When I foolishly explained this to his teacher, she gently turned to him and said, "Stanley, your poor mother won't help you. She can't read herself. You know, Mrs. Meier, she's illiterate."

I had a boy named Gary in my Kinder-

garten one year who never seemed to understand anything I asked him. He would nod "dumbly" if I asked, "do you have two brothers?" or "Do you have ten brothers?" He decided whether the answer should be "yes" or "no" by looking at my face or at the expression on the faces of the other children. Yet when he did not realize I was observing him, something in the style of his play, in his relationship with other children, in the vitality of his eyes made me suspect him of greater intelligence. I took him with me to the Museum of Science and Industry along with my four-year-old son. In this unsupervised, non-school environment he manipulated the instruments and figured out the gadgets with speed and accuracy, far outshining my own child. He never did talk to me; his communication remained almost monosyllabic. (His mother insisted that he was terribly chatty at home.) But his fear and self-doubt when confronted by the representatives of the outer world—a world with which his mother had minimal contact—paralyzed him.

Gary's case was extreme. But there are many borderline children whom we push into becoming Garys. For example, a booklet publicizing Headstart pointed to the "shocking" fact that poor city children do not know where milk comes from, because they typically answered: the store, a bottle, mother, the ice box. The acceptable answer is supposed to be: "cow." But when I asked a bright middle-class child where milk comes from, she told me, "the mailman brings it." Her mother was not alarmed; she knew that her daughter was not culturally deprived or stupid—she had simply confused the milkman and mailman! In fact, the child had accurately perceived a certain similarity.

In telling children no more insensitive than this child that their responses to life are constantly wrong, or at least irrelevant, when in fact the relevance and accuracy are often merely overlooked by the teacher, we do them a serious disservice. Instead of helping the child connect his own perceptions to a

broader reality, and this broader reality to schooling, the teacher is continuously severing all these vital intellectual connections to reality, connections that are crucial to generalization, abstraction, inventiveness, and creativity. And the lower-class child does not have parents who know how to undo the school's damage in this area.

Our continuous attempt to undermine a child's confidence in the utility of his own judgments and perceptions is most dramatically illustrated in the first reading material with which he is confronted. Much has been written on the "Dick and Jane" syndrome. Yet despite these many exposés, the latest rash of reading readiness material is even more sterile! The class and racial bias is less critical than the exclusion of honesty. Why is the word "like" all right but not "love" or "hate"? Why does no one hug or kiss, hit or fight? What makes us so afraid to talk of the truly powerful human situations? How can children who feel threatened by the anger and passion around them feel secure among people who are so fearful that they dare not even deal with life symbolically? How can reading, symbolic expression, be useful to children if they are told that their own lives are not proper material, that they are too terrible ever to put down on paper?

To suggest that school should permit and encourage an honest response to life, literature, science, etc., as a prerequisite to a student's coming to understand and investigate it more thoroughly, seems elementary. But if one spends much time observing normal classrooms and class room materials, it is clear that, in fact, this would be a radical departure. In our relations with children in school we display our greatest hypocrisy, demanding from children behavior we do not expect of ourselves or other adults. We demand that they pay attention and be observant at all times, and we then censure most of their observations. As a result children rarely expect that they will or should understand what we teach them. We reinforce constantly by our own

words and deeds a feeling that this whole educational enterprise is some vast test of their durability. Intelligence is only a weapon to use against others or to escape punishments. School, the one place where verbal and symbolic observations and explorations should be *most* appropriate, is probably the institution in which they are, in fact, most taboo!

Even if the teacher avoids open hostilities, or half-disguised antagonisms, she needs to recognize that her world, however enticing she might make it, cannot be "offered" as though a moral choice of value systems was involved. The child may be deprived of experiences we wish all children could have. But *ersatz* experiences are not a substitute. Our starting point must be the child's own life. The teacher cannot substitute her "good world" for his, however much he might want to choose it. For when the teacher abandons him, as she must, he cannot follow her into that world of hers. He is left with his own. She cannot replace his mother—however inadequate his own might be. The child is obliged, out of his need for protection and security and out of family loyalty, to resist any entrapment that might immobilize him in dealing with his own environment.

SOME CHILDREN RESIST entirely the enticements offered by very kind and sensitive teachers. Some immediately retaliate with nasty words and insults. Others appear to go along only to betray their trusting teacher later by acts of theft or violence, acts which finally succeed in getting her to turn against them (as they knew she must). Such disillusioned teachers then conclude that "being nice is a mistake." In all cases the children's resistance takes the form of withdrawing the best and most important intellectual potentialities they possess from school and teacher.

If loyalty to their own kind and safety from sudden humiliations requires failing in school, then, in a sense, many children actually do "choose" failure. In some cases they

lose access to their intellectual potentialities entirely, and a deep apathy pervades all their mental life. For others, fortunately, this apathy is only a mask worn at school.

I suspect that even our more successful lower-class students are handicapped in competing with middle-class children because of the mental strait-jacket in which they have learned to function. In succumbing to the school they have often been obliged to cut themselves off from their own world and their own experience and thus, since they cannot actually replace it with another, they dangerously limit their intellectual base. In assuming such tight control over their spontaneity they also reduce the insights they can stumble upon, and many become particularly pedantic or superficial students.

Many such children have merely substituted an imitation of middle-class style for learning. In stressing social manners and confusing them with academic content, we often in effect denigrate the substantive stuff of education. We create the impression that what distinguishes the educated from the uneducated is a matter of style—speech patterns, social know-how, the use of certain lingo, good handwriting, proper spelling, letter-writing forms, etc. Some succeed at copying this style only to be disappointed when they later discover that being “mistaken” for an educated person is insufficient. Since most do not have any idea how they have failed, they often attribute their defeat not to an actual educational deficit but to naked racial bias (of which there is plenty). Others turn angrily on the teachers who failed to perform the Pygmalion magic. And, increasingly, in the black “soul” rhetoric they turn the tables and contend that if it is only a matter of style, why shouldn’t their style be equally valid? And if

academic requirements are just certificates of competence in the white man’s ways, then why shouldn’t the black man control his own schools and issue his own documents? The black power militants may overstate their case, but as teachers we have rarely demonstrated the respect for learning that might disabuse our students or their parents of such anti-intellectual notions.

TO ENABLE CHILDREN to go through the long course of learning required by contemporary society we have got to be able to call upon what Jerome Bruner calls “the natural energies that sustain spontaneous learning.” The force behind such energy lies at least in part in the desire to make sense of and control life. The existence of vital life problems can be an asset to such an intellectual effort. But it requires an environment in which teachers do not constantly demand that children defend their existence and ignore their own perceptions. Few schools are so explicitly organized to do this as are our lower-class schools. And few lower-class schools are as destructively hostile to students as the all-black urban lower-class school. Not—as it is the fashion to claim these days—because it is “too middle-class” but because unlike good middle-class education (whether at home or at school) it does not respect children’s learning drives and experiential backgrounds.

If we intend to create a one-class educational system in America we must begin to look at not only what we are failing to teach children, but what the school, albeit often unintentionally, is teaching them. For what too many children who can least afford it are learning every day in our schools is a set of habits and defenses that rule out what we claim to seek.