

# Urban Educational Reform: A Teacher's Perspective

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Santora, an English teacher, came up to me one morning before school and said, "I'd like to talk with you about Jesse Lamar, one of my students. Jesse is bright though a bit quiet. He misses school a lot but is never a problem when he is present. He doesn't always do his homework, but what he does complete is pretty good. Although he's tempted, he hasn't become involved with street life, which is a good sign."

The next day, Mrs. Santora sent Jesse to see me in my office and small classroom in the library of Hillhouse High School in New Haven, Connecticut. I met a 15 year-old African-American of average height and appearance, slightly underweight and quite soft-spoken. He seemed pleased that Mrs. Santora had recommended him for our urban high school's Independent Study and Seminar Program (I.S.S.P.), a comprehensive talented and gifted program. I explained to Jesse that the State of Connecticut required me to test him before he could be admitted, and he sat down and took the Differential Aptitude Test, a remarkably culture-free standardized test. Jesse's scores on the verbal, quantitative, and abstract reasoning sections of the test, while not exceptional, were well above average for tenth-graders nationwide. This meant he could be accepted into I.S.S.P. at my discretion, which I chose to exercise.

Both Jesse and Mrs. Santora seemed pleased when Jesse received his acceptance letter. Mrs. Santora said that she was going to ask for some money from our Superintendent's Helping Hands Fund to buy some clothes for Jesse. The clothes Jesse wore the day he came to see me were shabby. Although many of our students come from poverty, nice dress is the rule rather than the exception at our school.

Now that Jesse was in the program, the next question was, "What would make the most sense for Jesse educationally?" This seems like a simple question, but the more I thought about it, the more complex it became. Eventually I framed the question more broadly: "What should we do to help our students become educated and productive citizens?"

I turned to a variety of sources for possible answers. There certainly are enough theories from which to choose. Many philosophers, historians, and social scientists have displayed strong interests in education, especially during

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this century. The trouble is they seldom agree, and as a result, educational theory has never been clear-cut. Reform movements have been constant and continuous. One theory and its concomitant practices gains the upper hand for a while, only to be displaced by another subtly claiming to be the real panacea for American education. Teachers like myself feel confused, yet most of us agree with the critics: our schools are not succeeding. That evening found me thinking about Jesse in relation to theories of education which offer some measure of hope—both for Jesse and for myself.

### II. THEORIES

The theories which ran through my head were traditionalism and progressivism, both primarily curricular theories; social developmentalism, which is both curricular and institutional; and school choice and revisionism, both of which are blueprints for institutional reform. I will now examine the assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses of each theory from my perspective as a practicing teacher in an urban high school.

#### A. *Traditionalism*

The philosophical position known as traditionalism has always been instrumental in American education. Tracing its roots to Plato, its most articulate current spokespersons include Mortimer Adler, William Bennett, and Diane Ravitch.<sup>1</sup> A few of their key assumptions are as follows: (1) The main purpose of schools is academic growth and development. Schools exist to develop the minds of young people. (2) Schools should accomplish their purpose by increasing young people's knowledge of common culture, the key ideas and concepts upon which this country is based. Our heritage is primarily, although not exclusively, a Western one, which means European thinkers must receive major curricular emphasis. (3) Schools exist to teach reading, writing, computation, scientific discovery, and critical thinking. Schools should not compromise this mission by becoming giant social service institutions in an attempt to be all things to all people.

Although there certainly are differences among the traditionalists, none would object to my setting up a reading program for Jesse that included Platonic philosophy or *The Federalist Papers*. Their only comment might be that *all* Hillhouse students should become familiar with these and other classics. They would want to see that all American high school students, not just

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1. See generally MORTIMER ADLER, *THE PAIDEIA PROPOSAL* (1982); WILLIAM BENNETT, *OUR CHILDREN, OUR COUNTRY* (1988); DIANE RAVITCH, *THE SCHOOLS WE DESERVE* (1985). Educational traditionalism seems to flourish when the mood in our country is conservative. Its most recent heyday may be about to end.

those in gifted programs, read the texts which best exemplify our Western heritage.

I believe traditionalism has some serious drawbacks, along with at least one major strength. The first drawback is that, in practice, traditionalism usually employs the empty cup approach to education: students are empty cups into which teachers pour knowledge, usually by lecturing or giving demonstrations, which the students passively absorb. Some modern day traditionalists do favor discussions, lab work, and other more active approaches to learning, but the lecture method fits traditionalism like a glove. Lectures just do not work for me—my students' attention wanders as they become bored and disinterested. Maybe this is due to my lack of dynamism, but maybe the method has become archaic in today's society.

Another drawback of traditionalism is a more substantive one. Many traditionalists have a limited view of what should be taught. In practice, this can lead to ethnocentric course content. For example, our 9th grade world history text does not include a chapter on the Egyptians. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's novels are not included on the required reading list for American literature courses even in our virtually all black school. My bright African-American students do not understand why such texts are not emphasized more and neither do I. We want the so-called canon to be inclusive, not exclusive.<sup>2</sup>

However, traditionalism does have one great overriding strength: its insistence that the school's primary purpose is to develop the mind. This gives traditionalism a clarity and singleness of purpose which some of the other theoretical positions lack. The traditionalists' assertion that other educational theories have diluted the schools' academic mission is not an easy argument to refute.

### B. *Progressivism*

The counterpoint to educational traditionalism is usually seen as progressivism, the philosophy of John Dewey.<sup>3</sup> Progressivism has been on the wane for more than a decade in American education, but given the ebb and flow of American educational reform, it is sure to make a comeback. While progressivism is usually described as the opposite of traditionalism, I prefer to see progressivism as occupying a middle ground between traditionalism and what might be called romanticism. Progressives believe that the learner's own experiences should be one base for curriculum, the other base being subject

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2. Some of my tenth grade ethno-literature students display a sensible perspective toward the battle over the literary canon raging on college campuses. During one debate on the subject, the mood of our class was, "why not read both Charles Dickens and Toni Morrison?"

3. See, e.g., JOHN DEWEY, *EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION* 17-23 (1938).

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matter. According to Dewey and his followers, curriculum exists where student's experiences meet academic content.<sup>4</sup> Like the traditionalists, Dewey wanted schools to develop thinking skills, but he believed inductive reasoning was as important as deductive reasoning.

As a Deweyian, I thought about proposing to Jesse that he begin his independent study by reading Elliott Liebow's *Tally's Corner*, an anthropological classic about streetcorner life in the 1960s. Then he could write a paper comparing Liebow's findings with streetcorner life today, based on his own observations and some interviews he could conduct. John Dewey would probably approve of my proposing this to Jesse, although giving Jesse some other structured alternatives, which could include Plato's *Republic* and *The Federalist Papers*, would also be desirable.

Some of the romantic educators of the 1960s would let Jesse set his own educational direction and objectives completely, an approach which does not hold much appeal for me. I believe the great majority of high school students need considerable guidance, direction, and structure if they are to be led along the path to enlightenment. On the other hand, incorporating students' experiences into their education seems most judicious. Every successful class I have ever conducted, whether it consisted of Hillhouse freshmen or Yale undergraduates in my urban education seminar, has involved connecting students' experiences to academic subject matter. The potential danger for the teacher employing this method is letting discussions become bull sessions which wander away from academic content never to return. Sharing experiences may be valuable, but putting one's experiences into a framework and context is invaluable.

### C. Social Developmentalism

Both challenging and crucial to me as an urban teacher is Yale psychiatrist Dr. James Comer's social developmental model.<sup>5</sup> The Comer model has greatly impacted not only the New Haven, Connecticut, school system in which I teach, but also urban school systems throughout the country. Because it is not a curriculum and instruction model, it avoids the traditionalist-progressive debate on course content and pedagogy. Instead, it is a model based upon the developmental needs of children. Dr. Comer believes that many institutions—most notably the family and the church—which once served as sources of support for young people have been placed under great strain. Schools can no longer successfully perform their academic function unless they become places of strong emotional and social support for those they serve; they must

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4. See generally *id.*; JOHN DEWEY, *THE CHILD AND THE CURRICULUM* (1902).

5. See JAMES COMER, *SCHOOL POWER* 184-202 (1980).

help teach the basic social skills some young people are not learning at home. Dr. Comer also believes that schools should work closely with parents, empowering and educating them to become more effective with their children. In short, the school, as the one social institution which serves almost all children, should do what it has to do to provide all young people with a chance to succeed. This may mean breakfast programs, health services, personal counseling, and of course, lots of support from caring adults. Mrs. Santora was already providing some of that support for Jesse, and I had to do the same if I accepted the Comer model. Being a good academic teacher would not be enough.

At first glance the Comer model seems beyond reproach, and indeed so far it has received very little academic or public criticism. But some educators, including many teachers I know, do wonder if the school can continue to take on new social service roles without compromising its primary academic mission. Dr. Comer and his supporters believe that urban schools which do not take a comprehensive developmental approach to education are doomed to failure and point to the results of 1980s style school reform spearheaded by traditionalists.<sup>6</sup> Comer's supporters argue that curriculum-based school reform did not succeed in urban areas. Traditionalists agree, but they believe their ideas were never given a fair chance in most bureaucratized, politicized big city school systems.

Even more potentially problematic is the Comer model's resemblance to the discredited cultural deprivationist model of the 1960s. The deprivationist model postulated that most lower class youth lacked the attributes needed for academic success, such as the ability to delay gratification and an ethic of achievement. The deprivationists believed schools could help in these areas, but critics saw this model as a negative one which carried the seeds of its own destruction by fostering in teachers the belief that "these kids can't learn." James Coleman's 1966 classic *Equality and Educational Opportunity* underscored the fear of the deprivationist critics by concluding that the main variable associated with school success is parental socioeconomic status.<sup>7</sup>

Many educational reformers do not want to hear about parental socioeconomic status, family factors, or cultural variables. They are convinced that teachers are quick to use these excuses for low academic achievement. A great deal of educational research has led to the not terribly surprising conclusion that teacher expectations are a critical variable in student achievement. Perhaps teachers, policy makers, and even educational researchers should forget about socioeconomic status, family factors, and cultural variables. Clearly, teachers

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6. Connie Leslie, *Help for No-Hope Kids*, Newsweek October 2, 1989 at 50, vol CXIV No. 14.

7. JAMES COLEMAN, *EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY* 20-23 (1966).

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need to hold high expectations for all students, which implies that knowing too much about a student's background would be detrimental.

James Comer, to his everlasting credit, has surpassed the cultural deprivationists in both theory and practice. Dr. Comer calls for high academic expectations, displays great sensitivity toward children, and never "blames the victims" for society's shortcomings.<sup>8</sup> But I cannot help but wonder whether Jesse needs the social development courses our school requires and whether Mrs. Santora and I would be more effective teachers if we concentrated only on teaching. Also, I recall Dewey's admonition that educators should always want for all children what they want for their own. How can I call for urban schools to become giant social service institutions while wanting an intensive academic education for my own children?

Dr. Comer, like many other modern educational reformers, focuses on the governance of schools, calling for School Planning and Management teams, which will empower teachers and parents in educational decision-making.<sup>9</sup> Comer believes this will help make schools more effective, a position which seems hard to criticize. But turning urban schools over to committees will require new, clearly demarcated lines of authority. How would Dr. Comer respond to the urban principal who says, "If I am going to be held responsible for everything that happens within this building, I must have the authority to make and implement decisions without getting group consensus?"

The Comer model has provided the guiding principles for our school system for the past five years, and the results are mixed. Academic achievement has remained about the same, which means too low, and our dropout rate has increased a bit due to non-school factors such as the arrival of crack cocaine. But without the Comer model, things might be considerably worse. During the late 1980s, I believe New Haven's schools were safer than they had been in more than two decades. Critics of social developmentalism say this is because the troublemakers dropped out of school; but maybe the social skills curriculum has worked. Maybe kids have learned, as they are urged by their teachers, to calm down, state their feelings, identify the problem, determine what options are open to them, and evaluate alternate plans of action before deciding what to do.<sup>10</sup>

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8. See COMER, *supra* note 5.

9. See, Leslie *supra* note 6.

10. I have had ongoing discussions with Tim Shriver, Social Development Supervisor in the New Haven Schools, over the value of the Comer model. He believes the social skills curriculum, based upon the work of James Comer and Yale Psychology Professor Roger Weisberg, is the best educational reformers can do under the circumstances. As you will see later, my counterargument is that the circumstances—the broader socioeconomic system—must be changed for school reform to succeed.

*D. School Choice*

There are some educational reformers of all ideological persuasions who are lukewarm toward both curricular reform and social developmentalism. Some of these reformers advocate school choice plans, which would radically alter the structure of public education. Choice advocates think Jesse's family should be allowed to choose the school he attends. They would like to see any school which accepts Jesse receive an amount of money equal to the per pupil cost in Connecticut. Funds could be added to Jesse's public scholarship if he were found to have any special needs, including economic deprivation. John Chubb and Terry Moe's choice plan would not allow schools to charge more than the normal per pupil cost in the school district, thus preventing public subsidies of what we now call private schools (which tend to have a higher per pupil cost).<sup>11</sup> Many educational progressives, who tend to be political liberals, support the Chubb and Moe plan and its emphasis on equality. Among educational traditionalists, who tend to be political conservatives, many would support choice plans which allow both public and private schools to be subsidized with public funds. Both approaches would break the current monopoly of public schools. How much this would improve the quality of Jesse's education is debatable. Chubb and Moe predict at least an average of a one-year increase in student achievement, which if it proved to be true, would be significant.<sup>12</sup>

My gut reaction to school choice is positive. Having taught for twenty years in both traditional and gifted programs and having spent the last three years administering two reasonably successful magnet desegregation programs, I would love to design my own school and compete in the marketplace for students. I would buy a three-family house in one of New Haven's middle class neighborhoods, hire three or four recent Yale graduates as teachers, admit sixty motivated students, and set up an academic and humane environment which would also provide me a comfortable income. After fifteen years, I would sell the school for half a million and move to a warmer climate.

But this scenario is rather short-sighted and selfish. What would happen to the students my school and other elite schools reject? Would unscrupulous entrepreneurs offer them rebates for enrollment - perhaps even in no-show schools? Would they be trained rather than educated? The problem with school choice is the same problem that exists with unregulated free market economics:

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11. JOHN E. CHUBB & TERRY M. MOE, *POLITICS, MARKETS AND AMERICA'S SCHOOLS* 220 (1990) ("While it is important to give parents and students as much flexibility as possible, we think it is unwise to allow them to supplement their scholarship amounts with personal funds. Such "add-ons" threaten to produce too many disparities and inequalities within the public system, and many citizens would regard this as unfair and burdensome.").

12. *Id.* at 140. Such an achievement would still leave American students behind students in almost all other industrialized nations.

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private gain does not always contribute to the public good. President Reagan “turned business loose” in 1981, which resulted in some economic growth, and a great many new millionaires, but also the Savings and Loan crisis, an increase in poverty and homelessness, and an economy which slid into a long-term recession. A poorly conceived school choice plan could likewise be disastrous. The education of America’s most privileged youngsters, many of whom now attend private schools anyway, would become subsidized, while the majority of young people would languish in schools more segregated racially and socioeconomically than those we currently have. The Klan could open schools, as could any other extremists interested in making some money in the education business.

### E. *Revisionism*

Perhaps the most challenging theory of all comes from leftist educational historians, sociologists, and political economists, known generally as the revisionist school. These thinkers believe that schools are society’s main socioeconomic sorting device and that educational reform will ultimately be unsuccessful unless accompanied by far-reaching changes in our socioeconomic structure. Jesse may still be coming to school, but many of his contemporaries have dropped out to sell drugs, believing the rewards of a middle-class, college-degreed lifestyle are not within their grasp. Revisionist thinkers would say, “Don’t try to change Jesse, don’t put your faith in school reform. Instead, change society so that everyone can earn a decent legitimate income. Get rid of racism and poverty. Then and only then will Jesse identify with what the schools are trying to do.”<sup>13</sup>

On the street, Jesse hears it this way: “Don’t play the fool. Don’t think you’ll get anywhere by going to school or by acting white. All a high school diploma will get you is a job at McDonald’s. The only place to get ahead is out here on the corner.”

Revisionist thinking has a powerful hold on me, even though the overwhelming majority of Americans currently reject its democratic/socialist sociopolitical agenda. Right now schools are “failing” with most urban youngsters while simultaneously “succeeding” with most suburban upper-middle class youth. This is not an accident, nor is it due to genetics. Nor is it because we urban public school teachers are stupid and incompetent, as the popular press often leads the public to believe. Many poor young people—especially poor minorities—believe they do not have access to middle-class status. Their

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13. See generally SAMUEL BOWLES & HERBERT GINTIS, *SCHOOLING IN CAPITALIST AMERICA* (1976); CHRISTOPHER JENCKS ET AL., *INEQUALITY* (1972); MICHAEL B. KATZ, *CLASS, BUREAUCRACY, AND SCHOOLS* (1971); JONATHAN KOZOL, *SAVAGE INEQUALITIES* (1991); JOHN OGBU, *THE NEXT GENERATION* (1974).



perception of their plight is not always defective. Their situations are indeed grave and their anomic responses—selling drugs, dropping out of school, having children—are quite understandable.

In 1974, John Ogbu, a Berkeley anthropologist and a native of Nigeria, wrote *The Next Generation*, an ethnography of education in an urban California neighborhood. In this important but overlooked work, Ogbu presented a dynamic account of urban school failure which, unlike most of the other works previously discussed, took several variables into account. Ogbu saw school failure as an adaptation, however unproductive, to limited educational opportunities. He observed that teachers in urban schools often had low expectations of their students. But Ogbu also pointed out that parental expectations for their children were also often low; many parents and their children believed success in the larger society would be denied them even if they received a great deal of education. Ogbu thus explained how educational failure was both assured and perpetuated from generation to generation.<sup>14</sup>

What I have seen in my twenty years as an urban teacher confirms Ogbu's findings. The great majority of students who come to our school from middle-class backgrounds tend to do quite well. A considerable number of other students experience upward social mobility (which is not inconsistent with the revisionist analysis), but far too many young people become discouraged and give up. These students are *not* "unmotivated;" rather they are discouraged: they do not believe middle-class America has a place for them.

Let us determine if the revisionists are right by supposing that 1980s-style curricular reform had been highly successful in urban schools. Let us further suppose almost all Americans were highly skilled in reading, math, and even critical thinking. Now what? We would still be facing a situation where millions of Americans would be working in unskilled, low-paying jobs; a society where college remained a dream for many poor and lower middle-class youth. Even if urban schools were centers of academic excellence, we would not have equal educational opportunity; nor would wealth and income be equitably distributed. Traditionalists and progressivists may be correct when they argue that an improved system of public education could increase American productivity, but the revisionists are equally on target when they note that educational reform alone does not have the potential to make our society less stratified. Put bluntly, say the revisionists, our schools are doing exactly what society wants them to do.

So what can be done? One answer might be to equalize school funding by eliminating our reliance on local property taxes for educational revenue. In his recent book *Savage Inequalities*, a poignant indictment of the glaring financial inequities in public education, Jonathan Kozol issues a clarion call for suffi-

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14. OGBU, *supra* note 13.

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cient and equal funding for our nation's public schools.<sup>15</sup> Yet while I agree with Kozol wholeheartedly, I agree even more with Christopher Jencks, who wrote in his 1974 masterpiece *Inequality*:

None of the evidence we have reviewed suggests that school reform can be expected to bring about significant social changes outside the schools. More specifically, the evidence suggests that equalizing educational opportunity would do very little to make adults more equal.<sup>16</sup>

Later Jencks adds:

As long as egalitarians assume that public policy cannot contribute to economic equality directly but must proceed by ingenious manipulations of marginal institutions like the schools, progress will remain glacial. If we want to move beyond this tradition, we will have to establish political control over the economic institutions that shape our society. This is what other countries usually call socialism.<sup>17</sup>

It incenses me when educational reformers say that our country's economic woes are due to our educational problems. They have cause and effect reversed. If equal opportunity and a decent, economically self-sufficient life were available to everyone who reached their educational potential, more people would do so. Instead, we have millions of Americans who simply cannot find jobs that pay living wages. Meanwhile, a small, educated elite is earning lots of money and wondering why everyone else cannot do the same. It is true that Jencks would have been wiser to use the acceptable term *economic democracy* rather than the despised "s" word *socialism*, but his analysis seems best able to explain the reality I see every day of my working life.

Traditionalists and progressives both love to blast the revisionist perspective. They say that it lets schools off the hook, that it subtly leads to low expectations for students, that it puts forth an unachievable political agenda, and that it is despairing. I will discuss these criticisms one by one. First, revisionism does not let the schools off the hook. Revisionists admit that schools are not doing what our citizenry would like them to do. They admit that American students' achievement levels are low and that improvement is necessary. Second, the revisionist perspective doesn't mean low expectations for students. Revisionists encourage hard work, academic commitment, and self discipline; however, they realize that these values will not be maintained in a society which systematically denies both equal opportunity and a living wage to millions. Third, the revisionist political agenda is not unachievable. We have sent men to the moon and we quickly and effectively mobilized against the Iraqis when we decided we had to. Our leaders should be able to do something about the enormous financial disparities among Americans that are creating a few more have's, a great many more have-not's, and a shrinking and angry middle class. Finally, the revisionist perspective should not be

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15. KOZOL, *supra* note 13.

16. JENCKS, *supra* note 13, at 255.

17. *Id.* at 265.

viewed as despairing, particularly as far as individuals are concerned. Like many teachers, I have experienced more than a few "small victories"<sup>18</sup> and have seen students use education to rise from poverty into the middle class. The problem is that there are not enough small victories. This is endemic in a competitive society which not only turns people into winners and losers, but makes certain that the winners live so much better than the losers that succeeding generations find their fate greatly affected by the socioeconomic status of their family of origin.

### III. CONCLUSION

Where does all this leave Jesse? He may be quite confused, but so are most educators. If Jesse had a knee injury and went to a doctor, the course of treatment would be fairly clear. At least it would be clearer than what urban schools should be doing for Jesse at this time.

As a teacher who is a street-level bureaucrat, or a direct service provider if you prefer, I can choose only among traditionalism, progressivism, and social developmentalism. I choose to place my bets on progressivism. This means I must always hold high academic expectations for Jesse, trying to help him reach his full intellectual and creative potential. As a Deweyian, I will see that whatever Jesse studies with me—and he will have some structured choices—allows him to draw on his experiences to help him think, write, analyze, and develop his creativity. Whether I become a key person in Jesse's support network remains to be seen. Even if I do not, I can still teach Jesse effectively.

As a theoretician, I cast my fate with revisionism, believing none of the other theories addresses the underlying reasons why urban schools are perceived as failing. My own school system, where all of the theories except revisionism have been implemented within the past two decades, may help to illustrate this. We have a dynamic and dedicated Superintendent of Schools, an outstanding administrative team at our high school, and a great many competent and caring teachers. Yet fewer than half our entering freshmen graduate from high school and, while most of our high school graduates do enter post-secondary education, a low percentage receive degrees. Without denying the possibility of upward mobility for our best and brightest, I can declare that our students are part of a caste and class system which makes it very difficult for them to get ahead. School reform alone cannot rectify this situation. Those who want a society more equitable and just must focus their attention elsewhere.

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18. *SEE* SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN, *SMALL VICTORIES* (1990). Freedman uses this term beautifully in recounting a year in the life of an heroic English teacher named Jessica Siegel. Nothing in this paper should be construed to imply that good teaching doesn't matter in the schools we now have.

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Perhaps an analogy will help. If our society is a car, the schools are the carburetor, the place where raw material is processed. The engine resembles the economic system, the center of production. The transmission, which controls the distribution of power, is analogous to the political system. We *do* have carburetor problems, but our engine and transmission also need major repairs. The sooner we realize this, the sooner we will realize that we must attack the root cause of school failure, our society's inability to provide each and every citizen a job where he or she can earn a decent living.

Right now we seem to lack the desire to change this situation. We have made our tax system more regressive; we have watched working-class jobs go overseas without lifting a finger to help those affected; we have sat by while despair has swept through urban America and into the suburbs and small towns. Instead of attacking these enormous problems, we have focused primarily on school reform, myopically showing faith in an institution that may be on its last legs.

We need to issue a call based on moral and religious principles for a society which has room for everyone to work and live in dignity. This is not to say everyone must be equal economically. But how can a rational and sensitive person defend the economic disparities we now have in America? How can we allow children to grow up ill-housed and ill-nourished in the wealthiest country in the world? My call for social and economic change is not a cop-out designed to excuse schools. Nor is it a sign of cynicism. It may be the only hope for true educational reform.