



Classroom in Santiago, Chile: Teaching requires an understanding of poverty.

TEACHING FAILURE

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“Carlos is lazy! Yazmin steals!”

From the description given by their teacher of these two children in a 1982 first grade class in South America, it seems certain they will be school failures by the end of the year. They will not have learnt what their teacher set out to teach them. They may only move on to a second grade if the law requires that they be promoted. Sooner or later, Carlos and Yazmin will drop out.

In another school, a teacher says of her “problem children”: “These are older children. One is repeating second grade. He can’t read! He can’t write in spite of being a repeater. The other one repeated first grade and is now repeating second grade. He can’t read or write either. They both have problems at home, that’s why they can’t concentrate on their school work.”

School failure is a problem that primarily affects the children of the poor. In the 1970s, approximately one out of every two children in Latin America was repeating the first grade. And although the repeaters remain several years in school, they will pass only a few grades.

These children have been considered failures because of their background. Poor children are undernourished, and often lack even the barest elements of learning stimulation at home to prepare them for schoolwork. Their parents either work so hard that they have no time to interact with the children, or, because they are unemployed, the parents lack the psychological strength to deal with their children’s difficulties.

Poor children who live in the capital

cities of Latin America are part of the marginal society — they know very little of the cultural opportunities of better-off inhabitants. Their homes may be shacks lacking running water and electricity, such as one finds in *los altos* (the high areas) of La Paz, Bolivia. Or their homes may be in a shantytown area of Santiago, Chile, where they may experience early morning police raids that drive their fathers out of the home to bring them back humiliated and frustrated.

When these children go to school they are thrust into what could be for them an opportunity to be children; to play, to find caring adults. Or, they may be delivered into the hands of teachers who will decide at some point that they can never make it and label them as Carlos and Yazmin were labelled — failures.

During the 1960s and 1970s, an important number of survey studies in the developed and less-developed world revealed a relationship between school achievement and background factors such as socioeconomic level, parent education, and parental attitudes to school. The findings of these studies pointed to the devastating effects of poverty upon human development.

Important as they were, such studies have often been used to neglect the examination of what goes on in the schools themselves that could affect the achievement of the poor. And teachers and school administrators have felt that there is little they can do to help the very deprived child to learn.

Challenges to this viewpoint have been raised on many sides, urging that

we look closer at what happens within the schools that leads to failure. With support from IDRC, a group of Latin-American researchers has undertaken research precisely from this perspective. The teams went into primary schools in poor urban and rural areas of Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, and Venezuela to examine the dynamics within them and their relation to the community outside.

The researchers carried out interviews with teachers, administrators, children, parents and other members of the surrounding community. They spent a long time in their setting trying to become a part of the scene. By careful recording and daily writing-up of notes, the researchers gathered an enormous amount of information, which was organized so as to allow for an interpretation of the events observed. The questions that directed their observations were: What happens to children in school that they fail? What is the teacher’s role in this failure?

The classrooms observed in the four countries included in the study were the first to fourth grades. The children all came from poor backgrounds. As a result of identifying key events and then searching for explanations from within the data, a set of broad categories has emerged that serves to identify processes that may account for *actual* failure of children who are *potential* failures because of their background. These categories can be stated as “downgrading the losers”; “teaching unclearly and with errors”; “encouraging repetitive nominalism”; and “frustrating participation.”

Downgrading the losers. Researchers observed children who were judged as being poor learners, lazy, untidy, misbehaved, and who were consistently treated as such no matter what they did to try and improve or change. These children experienced a very limited type of interaction with their teachers. Most of it consisted of being “told off” — reprimanded for their failures in front of the whole class. Often these children had to sit in awkward positions, either at the back or at the side of the classroom, far from the teacher’s direct view. The negative perception held by these teachers was also transmitted to the other children, so that the unfortunate offenders were accused by teachers and peers alike.

Yazmin was one of those children. Teacher: “Yazmin, come!” (Yazmin walks to the chalkboard and is asked to write a number. She is left-handed. She writes a ‘2’, and the teacher says that it is wrong.)

Yazmin: “Four?”

Teacher: “All right, four.” (Yazmin writes ‘4’ slowly with her left hand. The teacher puts a plus sign next to the number and Yazmin writes ‘3’.

The teacher had wanted a '1'.
Teacher: "That's not a one. What number is that?"

Children (in chorus): "Three."

Teacher (with annoyed tone): "Go on, then, write '1'." (Yazmin looks at the chalkboard and does not write anything. Several seconds go by.)

Teacher: "Sit down and watch what someone else does."

Several children (shouting): "1!" "1!"

Teacher: "Gilda, you are so quiet. Come here." (Gilda goes to the chalkboard and the teacher holds her hand as Gilda attempts to write the number '1'. However, she writes it backwards.)

Teacher: "No, that number is reversed." (She erases it and then holds the child's hand and helps her write it correctly. She then helps Gilda write the number '5', which is the correct sum of four plus one.)

It was obvious that Gilda and Yazmin received different treatment: one was a caring type of help; the other, rejection. What the teacher thinks of Yazmin was recorded in an interview with her:

"She is an awful girl. She does terrible things. Yesterday there was a circus here in the school. A boy brought a packet of biscuits to eat at the circus. I don't know how Yazmin managed to get into the room and steal the biscuits, but she did. When we asked her about it she admitted she had done it. She doesn't deny things. The other day, in front of everybody, she took a banana from a friend's bag and ate it. The problem is that her mother doesn't believe me when I tell her."

The other children also had something to say about Yazmin:

Children (to the observer): "She is lazy!"

Observer: "Why is she lazy?"

Child: "Because she is untidy. Her books are dirty. Look!" (She opens a book and shows it. Yazmin, who is present, snatches it away.)

Unclear and erroneous teaching.

Teachers are not always accurate in what they convey to the children, nor clear in the way they present their material. When lack of clarity and erroneous content are given in the context of an authoritarian classroom atmosphere, the weaker children become the main victims.

Encouraging repetitive nominalism.

A common way of teaching, found almost everywhere, was that of having children repeat words after the teacher, or give a word after another clue word has been given. Where such a methodology was used, rarely was there an effort to see if the children really understood what they were repeating. Overheard in a third-grade math class on the theory of sets:

Teacher: "How many units in one hundred?"

Pupil: "One."

Teacher: "How many units, units?"

Pupil: "Ten."

Children (in chorus): "One hundred!"

Teacher: "One hundred what?"

Children (in chorus): "Units."

Teacher: "Oh, one hundred units; so how many units does a hundred have?"

Pupil: "Ten."

Pupil: "One hundred."

Teacher: "One hundred what?"

Children (in chorus): "Units."

Other children (in chorus):

"Hundredths."

Teacher: "So we have one hundred units; if we add another hundred, how many do we have?"

Children (in chorus): "Two hundred."

Frustrating participation. It is almost a universal pedagogical notion that children need to be participants in the learning process, not passive recipients of information. However, many of the classrooms observed presented a limited participation, linked to the type of repetitive questioning described above, or to gain information about events occurring in the classroom and about other children. Seldom did the children's questions appear to be considered very seriously.



Aymara Indian children and their mothers in La Paz, Bolivia: a special struggle against failure. Photo: Beatrice Avalos

Carol is a fourth grader whom the teacher considers to be lazy. She is constantly being reprimanded for something. Carol rarely goes up to the teacher's desk to ask about what she is doing. But when she does, the following dialogue is typical of the response. Carol (showing her book): "Miss, is this right? The little animals here and the organs there?"

Teacher: "You again! And then you cry... 'Miss, I don't have... Miss, here, Miss there.' You still have not finished your Spanish work!"

But some children do get heard when they cry, especially if they are reporting on the behaviour of others who are less favoured.

There are many other factors that obviously contribute to a child's failure, including the perception that the various actors in the process have of failure.

Failure for the first-grade teachers is the fact that children did not acquire reading and writing skills. But in the everyday context of their classroom,

they are more concerned with the formal aspects of the child's activity rather than in helping him/her to learn: Clean, neat books and polite gestures are important elements for judging the children.

Failure for the parents is having their child repeat a class or having eventually to drop out of school. Parents attribute failure not to the school, but to their own poor situation. It was an exception find a Bolivian mother who said: "The teacher is not good. She calls my son an ass. I think they have caused a trauma in him. Boris came up to me one day, crying: 'I am an ass, mama, I don't want to go back to school!'"

Most parents prefer to say that their child is doing poorly because they have no time or means to help in studies, or that the child is probably mentally deficient, or "lacks a vitamin."

The children themselves rarely perceive where their problems lie. They all acknowledge that the school is an important place for them and that what is wrong is probably wrong with themselves. The successful children, as observed in the classrooms, were those who — apart from native ability, better home conditions — had learnt "the rules of the game." They knew when to put on a questioning face when the teacher required it, or to avoid asking questions, especially those that might embarrass the teacher. Children knew that to be successful they must convey that they are interested in what is being said or done, and that this means asking procedural questions: "What are we going to write?" "This way, Senora Elvira?" (showing a notebook). "How many lines should we leave?" Successful children are also always there to provide a service for the teacher, to wipe the chalkboard or pass a book.

And how do the teachers themselves understand the problem of failure? Too often they are quite unaware of how their teaching reinforces the failings in a child. Given that they teach very deprived children, teachers consider background factors to be a major cause of poor learning. In some cases, however, they are not well aware of the specific home problems children have and treat them as if these did not exist. An administrator in the Bolivian education system told a researcher how a teacher constantly punished a girl who did not do her homework, not knowing the child had to work to support a disabled father.

Strong as this study found the element of teacher responsibility for failure, it was somewhat mitigated by several factors that do affect the teachers' situation. These vary from country to country, but to some extent can be generalized. Teachers act as they have seen others do, and as they were taught to do during their training period. Evidence for some countries indicates that methods used in the Normal Schools (where primary teachers are trained) are similar to those we have

called "repetitive nominalism". Teachers are taught with superficial participation, and little focus on meaningful content or on an inquiry-oriented attitude.

Teachers are poorly paid. In fact, they belong to the lowest groups within the social échelons of their countries. And teachers work in conditions that might seem impossible to a colleague in North America or Europe. In La Paz, Bolivia, on a beautiful hilltop but in freezing temperatures, observers saw children having a class outside because there was no room in the school. Children also stand in their classrooms throughout their classes because of overcrowding and lack of desks.

Administrative rules and regulations

also convert an important part of Colombian teachers' time into a forms filling routine. Or political changes disrupt the course of teacher's lives, such as occurred in Chile with the transfer of schools to the control of municipalities. Teachers lost their tenured position and have found themselves at the mercy of new and often arbitrary authorities not used to having schools within their offices.

Problems cannot be dealt with by only looking at a few of their elements, but it seems that a beginning needs to be made somewhere to help reduce the number of children condemned to failure. Teachers are willing to change and they know that theirs is an important social function, but they rarely

know *how* what they do affects their children.

More research that tells us more about life in the schools, and how it relates to their communities, will help us to understand where and how changes can be made. In-service teacher training that builds on this research and helps teachers see themselves in their teaching should also help them to develop teaching attitudes and practices that provide a greater chance for the children of the poor. □

Beatrice Avalos, a Chilean education researcher, was coordinator of the IDRC teacher effectiveness project network in Latin America.

STUDYING TEACHERS

The students were passing around a book full of pictures of lions, elephants and hippopotamuses. Their whispering and muffled laughter inevitably reached the ears of the teacher, who abruptly stopped what he was doing.

But rather than punish those who had disturbed him, this teacher asked them to share the book with everyone in the class. Then he led a brief discussion on African wildlife before turning to the lesson.

This incident, in Sierra Leone in West Africa, eventually led to the establishment of a small library in the classroom. The teacher had deliberately chosen to emphasize the book and its contents. For once, his students actually had shown an interest in the printed page!

Magnus Cole, a professor of educational development at Njala University College in Sierra Leone, began collecting anecdotal information like this in January 1980. With support from IDRC, he planned to use it to investigate the effectiveness of elementary and secondary school teachers in his country. His method involved interviewing the "students": He asked adults who had graduated to the labour force what actions by their teachers had most influenced them, positively or negatively, in the learning process.

Among other things, the objective was to find out what the *good teachers* did. By comparing "good teaching", as defined by students, with standard professional evaluation techniques, Mr Cole hoped to obtain information useful in improving effectiveness.

Close to 1000 anecdotes were gathered. When the time came to compile and classify them, he found that memories related to discipline were, tragically, the most numerous. Worse still, negative incidents, in which discipline was used in a purely punitive and unfair manner, were twice as numerous as those in which discipline was exercised fairly and with a beneficial effect on the student. Researchers identified 16 different categories of negative incidents that discouraged students from learning. Only 11 positive categories of incidents that encouraged the students to learn were identified.

The interviews were full of cases of undeserved

punishment, arbitrary suspension and excessive detention. Some remembered teachers who cancelled the lunch break, others recall being injured by teachers.

Fortunately, the situation is changing. In the past, parents unquestioningly supported the disciplinary

measures imposed by teachers. Today, because the parents themselves have somewhat higher levels of education, they defend their children against abusive punishment by teachers. Especially in the towns and villages, where classes are smaller and people know each other, teachers less frequently resort to physical punishment.

The results of this West African investigation confirm the arguments of specialists around the world, who say that reinforcing positive behaviour is better than using negative disciplinary measures in teaching.

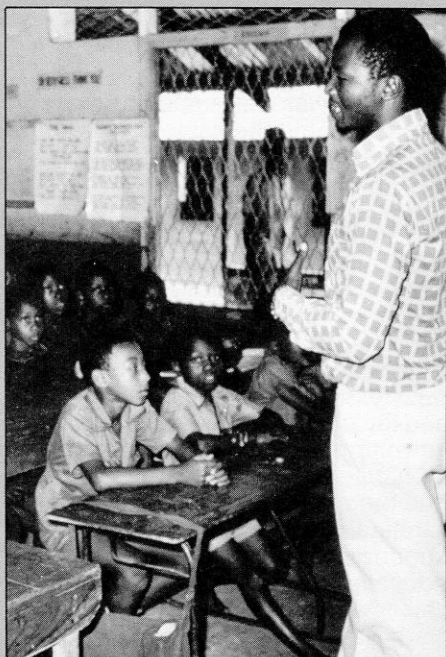
Certainly, less importance should be placed on corporal punishment or discipline, the study suggests. When children misbehave the teacher should first begin by finding out the reason for the behavior, rather than immediately try to change it by force.

At a recent national seminar organized by Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education in Freetown, authorities agreed with Mr Cole that from now

on, young teachers in training should be made aware of the importance of using positive methods of changing learning behavior. Further, the investigation showed that a teacher's academic knowledge of a subject was not the determining factor in whether or not students wanted to learn. A fair-minded teacher who was prepared to help the weaker students and who regularly organized extra-curricular activities was a better motivator of learning.

"Teachers do not have to be super qualified," Magnus Cole concludes. He recommends intensive on-the-job training programs, with regular sessions during which teachers could discuss their problems and help each other. And what is good for students is also good for teachers: A little positive reinforcement goes a long way.

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In Sierra Leone, the best teachers were those who could motivate children.