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Holler if you can hear me in the ghetto:

A comparative analysis of

Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students by Gregory Michie

and

Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform by Jean Anyon

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Gregory Michie's remembrance of his experience as a teacher in an underserved urban elementary school in Chicago, Illinois, "Holler If You Hear Me", fervently underscores a continued hope for quality schooling that both he and his students maintain is possible while Jean Anyon's "Ghetto Schooling" reports on the bleak history of the Newark, New Jersey public school system and its ineffective reforms as a general reflection of reforming lower performing urban schools across the country. Anyon offers suggestions for education reform that focus on improving social conditions of communities. Miche's student narratives reveal how an effective pedagogy of understanding provides hope for the future despite relentless negative conditions. Anyon's proposals are far-reaching, top down school reform approaches, while Miche's insights focus on viable inside-out approaches. Improvement in urban schools is within reach when immediate, smaller-scale reforms are attempted. Anyon's state and federal level policy-centered reform recommendations will not provide immediate relief to the plight of under performing urban school districts. Michie's positive micro-interventions demonstrate that successful classroom level, student centered school reform happens everyday.

Anyon's assessment of the challenges facing inner city public schooling highlights a historical lack of funding for inner city schools. The education of inner city students is ineffective because fewer resources are given to urban schools. The financial burden of funding schools should not be placed solely on taxpayers (creating financial disparity between

urban and suburban schools); reparations from federal and corporate sources should equalize funding amongst districts (48). This absence of financial support for urban schools and their communities has created a problematic situation that is difficult to repair.

Teachers express their exasperation to Michie, “they often feel that they’re out of their depth, overwhelmed by the needs of their students and the demands of the job” (209). Michie’s students convey experiences that reflect low cultural expectations, “there’s no pressure, there’s never any question about what you’re gonna do after high school” (74). Extremely harsh situations that students experience at home negatively affect their success in school. Their work and their relationship with their teacher suffers (127). Minority students give up on learning when consistently faced with “never quite fitting in, of being bullied by classmates and kicked around by cops” (207). Children of non-U.S. citizens “[walk] around blind” unable to participate in classroom activities” because their parents lack the resources to provide such basic health needs as prescription glasses (111). Michie’s students are dealing with situations that cannot be worse. Michie’s comments to his student, “If we lose hope, the world’s going to hell for sure.” She snaps, “What do you mean? This is hell” (181). Yet, with all these adverse challenges, Michie, believes in seeing the student as a whole (97), not as a set of cultural, social, racial and economic characteristics. He remembers the distinction a fellow teacher made clear to him: “Acknowledging [students] and giving them opportunities to reflect on their experiences in the classroom may help them to become better equipped to make better choices. It can enable them to see alternative realities, to envision other futures for themselves” (150). Another explained to Michie, “We really have to understand these kids as human people who have basic needs that are not being answered” (150). His students positively respond to this effort by praising “teachers who have [give] inspiration, who [show] me I can be somebody- no matter my color, my gender, my race, age whatever- it’s what’s inside that counts” (117).

Anyon correlates underperforming inner city schools with the degraded communities they are a part of. The goal of reforming inner city schools is part of a broader strategy of top-down social change. To achieve change, educational reformers should join with organizations that offer assistance with training, employment, legal guidance, housing, health care, and voter registration. Connecting with those who create better social conditions within a community will assist education reformers in reaching their goals of improving that community’s school (168). “When inner city students and their families have access to the range of services that provide a realistic expectation that education will lead to

better jobs, lives and futures, as is expected in most middle-class and affluent homes, then the students will have a reason to make an educational effort" (170). Achieving this grand goal of eliminating poverty will take time.

Michie recommends inside-out approaches to school reform. He believes that effective teaching "requires looking critically at the way things are in schools, questioning how they might be different, and taking action if the situation calls for it. Though this might mean rethinking schoolwide policies and practices, for most teachers it means starting with one's own classroom" (198). Top-down accountability measures threaten more expansive visions good education. Michie changes his efforts (even mid-lesson) to redirect his classes. "Sometimes that's what being a good teacher is: knowing when to crumple up your plans, get out of the way, and give the kids room to learn" (13). This method of effecting positive change at the classroom level is appreciated by Michie's students. "What makes a good teacher is someone who understands [us]. If the teacher knows how the students are thinking, [the teacher] can teach a class more easily" (154). Sometimes it's as simple as the teacher showing the student they care. As a result, the student repays the teacher "by listening and studying hard in class" (133).

Anyon's strategy to enable schools to live up to their potential requires a new "war on poverty". She believes the ultimate goals of education reform ought to be "to redress the effects of destructive ghettoization of cities" as "academic achievement is correlated to socio-economic status" (164). Though "the improvement of teaching and learning is clearly of utmost importance for school reform"(174), she does not believe this improvement can occur without a top-down allocation of funding for training school staff and providing new materials. For any of these types of traditional school reform to achieve success they need to be augmented by a more comprehensive vision of expansive social and economic change (164). Contrastingly, Michie keeps "one eye on the bigger picture and the other on the work at hand" (211). He does not deny the importance of improving a student's social and economic situation, but one of his goals is "to challenge students to face their biases, to rethink some of their preconceived notions about themselves and others" (93). This approach allows students to reflect on their standing in society, because "you don't have to be part of somebody else's chain. You can start your own- a good one" (116). Hope for another path is echoed by his students, revealing the commitment the students have towards their neighborhood (77), their education (57) and their aspirations to be "something that meant something. [They] don't want to be just an average person. [They] want to stand out. [They] want to be able to say

that [they] actually made a difference" (188).

Anyon and Michie both agree that a school's success depends on the context of its community. Anyon presents a long list of broad scale reform that will take many renewed state and federal efforts to provide the necessary funding. The problems of urban schools is a problem for everyone, "if we do not pull together-the boat may capsize and we will all sink" (Anyon, 183). Michie presents many examples of immediate change that result in direct improvement. Successful reform seems possible on a smaller scale, it can immediately affect student achievement. The wider view of educational reform is bleak. Students are taught merely to perform well on standardized tests, instruction is based on the dispassionate data of an entire district and not the needs of the individual student, and inequities in school funding have put inner city schools in a deficit behind suburban schools. Michie conveys "that teachers need to see their students- as well as their students' families and communities-as fully as possible, recognizing and valuing their assets rather than zeroing in on deficits (197). "At its best, teaching is a reciprocal endeavor: You guide and are guided, show and are shown, speak and listen, receive as much as you give" (Michie, 200). This simple statement leaves me more hopeful about the possibility of meaningful reform of urban schools, because hope starts in the classroom, with teachers understanding their students and students responding through renewed efforts towards achievement.

Works Cited

Anyon, Jean. *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997. Print.

Michie, Gregory. *Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students*. 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009. Print.