

*Volunteers seek to alleviate
patterns of racial and class prejudice
in America.*

Tutors for Disadvantaged Youth

THE social revolution of the past decade has brought a new phenomenon to the scenes of urban American education. Time after time, in city after city,² we have witnessed the spectacle of hundreds of young people spending their own after-school or after-work hours tutoring disadvantaged youngsters.

We have seen white, middle class college or high school students walk into the urban ghettos, into the homes and communities of Negro, lower class students. Sometimes they have feared the ghetto, sometimes they have lacked confidence in their own skills and competencies, and sometimes they have feared the interpersonal contacts they long to make. But their commitment, courage and contact pose a new strategy for dealing with some of the most pressing problems facing American education today.

This article describes this new phenomenon, including its growth, targets and tactics. Further, it reviews some of

the challenges tutorial programs present to the established educational order, and some suggestions for cooperation and collaboration among tutors, teachers, and educational administrators.

What are tutorials? Where did they come from?

The tutorial programs involve people who wish to tutor and people who wish to be tutored. Typically, tutors are white, middle class, college students; and tutees are Negro, lower class, high school or elementary school students. These two populations meet together with the expressed purpose of increasing the intellectual skills and school performance of the tutee. Usually, this is done out of school in small group or individual teaching situations.³ These cross-class, cross-race contacts essentially seek to correct some of the more obvious ills of a segregated society, and the ills of an educational system that inadequately corrects for societal evils.

Tutorials initially developed out of

¹ The author wishes to express his appreciation to Joan Chesler and Orian Worden for their suggestions and comments on this paper.

² Tutorial programs are currently being conducted in many cities throughout the country. Most of these programs are locally financed and staffed, but some regional and national organizations have been active in the initiation and support of these programs.

³ There are many variations on this basic model; sometimes the stated purpose is not intellectual development, but creative expression, social consciousness or community development and action. Sometimes high school students tutor elementary school students, and sometimes both populations are Negro, or both are white.

northern students' involvement in the civil rights movement. In the late fifties, high school and college students in the deep south were pledging their minds and bodies to fight for human freedom, for a new education and a new society. Northern college students sought a part they could play in this revolution for human rights; and they were dissatisfied with merely raising food and money and giving intellectual support. They turned to their own backyards, and sought in their own communities the answer to the question that has plagued young people in America for generations: "What can I do to meaningfully express the values I cherish?"

The growing rate of school dropouts was gaining increased public attention at the same time. In particular, students and educators were concerned about the high concentration of dropouts in those disadvantaged segments of our urban communities populated by racial, economic and cultural minorities. Out of the individual search for meaningful acts in a time of crisis in values; out of the frustrating and limbo role of a college student in a vibrant time; and out of the desperate need for new forms of education to meet the needs of disadvantaged minorities, the tutorial program was developed.

In what ways have urban schools been inadequate to meet the needs of disadvantaged youth?

The fact that tutorials exist and have expanded reflects the gap between the needs, skills and desires of disadvantaged youngsters and the established curriculum, design and goals of contemporary urban education. In some cases the schools have been unwilling or unable to change to close this gap, and in other cases the youth themselves have not been

able to reach out to promising opportunities.

Until very recently, urban school systems were neither responsive nor responsible to the needs of their vast economic and racial minorities. Except in select classrooms and schools systems, the problem was ignored. The fact that minorities seldom exercised their political rights and privileges permitted many urban administrations—from welfare boards through sanitation commissions—to be non-responsible and therefore non-responsive to their constituencies. More recently, of course, urban minorities have expressed their political power, thus forcing educational leaders and other administrators to be more responsible to their demands and needs. Because of these recent actions, the gap between the needs of disadvantaged populations and the structure of contemporary education is now getting more attention.

The form and content of primary and secondary education in America are geared to the skills and aspirations of the vast range of middle class students. The lower class youngster who enters a school designed for the middle class enters an alien institution, an institution that denies or ignores much of his past experience and future hopes. For instance, the student who comes from an environment where noise and physical expression are the mode, experiences great strain in meeting the classroom demands of gentility, quiet, physical restraint, and verbal response.

The average middle class teacher in a middle class classroom places great value on verbal learning and verbal competition among his students. Examinations, conflict, aggression and tenderness are all handled in a predominantly verbal medium. The lower class youngster has usually learned to express these feelings

and to deal with such situations in a predominantly motoric, physical and non-verbal style. Now he has to learn to compete verbally instead of physically. When he does revert to his own skills and mode of expression he is severely punished for antisocial behavior. There is no evidence to show, for instance, that physical aggression is any less painful than verbal teasing, but a verbal style is the middle class mode in the classroom. No wonder the schools and schoolteachers are usually seen by lower class minorities as missionaries of an alien culture. In these and other ways it has been clear that schools are built for, and reward, middle class behavior patterns and not those of lower class youngsters.

The middle class child is usually quite willing to put his faith in the school as an eventual guarantee to economic and moral satisfaction. He can delay gratification via his faith and his parents' support of a tradition of intellectual and scholastic preparation. Yet for the lower class youngster who has no library at home, whose parents have not themselves lasted through the educational maze, whose peers are not college bound and scholastically or economically mobile, and who has no history of educational success, the bridge of faith is indeed tenuous. His scholastic career is often one of constant punishment and failure, and therefore he has little faith in, or intrinsic or extrinsic motivation for, academic tasks.

Some of the tasks youngsters are asked to perform, even some they can manage, are seen by them as irrelevant. Vocational training for obsolete occupations is an example of the irrelevance of some schooling for disadvantaged youth. Faced with the future of a shrinking job market, the only access to which requires spending fifteen or more years in an alien institution, it often seems quite rational

to drop out sooner rather than later. Since much of the disadvantaged youngster's work in schools is experienced as irrelevance or as failure, it is small wonder that the agents of the school find it difficult to penetrate his consciousness with their middle class dreams for him.

Finally, of course, the lower class Negro youngster learns the lesson of failure from the lives of others around him. Newspapers, job roles, housing and politicians all teach the society's lesson of prejudice and disadvantage. The label of "disadvantaged" alone may be enough to fulfill the prophecy of failure. The schools would deliberately have to unteach the incidental learning of a lifetime to reverse the predictions of self-failure for the disadvantaged youth.

The schools are not wholly to blame for these societal failures. They are only partly responsible for having taught much of what the society believes about minorities. Not to teach this would in effect mean a tremendous effort to teach the opposite—something we have not yet committed ourselves to doing. Some examples of what would be required include: a drastic reduction in class size, especially in classes of youngsters with particular personal or social problems; bussing, redistricting or anything else which guarantees school heterogeneity in order to counter residential segregation; all-day schools with supervised late-afternoon and evening recreation and social programs; an expansion of preschool nurseries; financial support of families who need a teen-ager's meager earning power; the recruitment and pay of better teachers in disadvan-

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taged areas; a treatment of the societal and personal ills of prejudice and segregation right in the classroom; and the revision of curriculum to deal with the needs and desires of disadvantaged youngsters in a humane, rather than a paternalistic manner. It is not likely that most schools and school systems can free enough time and energy for such an effort at this time. Nor is it likely that most school systems can develop the necessary inclination and initiative to institute the above examples.

*How can the tutorials help deal with these gaps and problems?*⁴

If the above are some problems involved in the mass education of urban minorities, what possible role can tutorials play in alleviating these problems? One important advantage of the tutorial program is that it is not part of the vast and complex educational bureaucracy, and it is not involved in mass education. In many ways this status frees tutors to experiment with educational content, human contact, and their own commitment to personal and social growth.

Tutors do not have all the administrative responsibilities of teachers, nor do they have to deal with large classes of thirty children and more. They are not concerned with class discipline, lunch money, attendance cards, library cards, rigid schedules, yard duty and the like. Perhaps as important, tutors are not teachers filling specific job roles and getting paid for prescribed tasks; rather they are volunteers working to realize their values through meaningful action. Inasmuch as the tutorial takes place outside of the classroom and school build-

ing, the tutor can avoid being the object of the youngster's entire complex of anti-teacher and anti-school learnings. For all of these reasons tutors are relatively free to modify curricular content to suit the skills and needs of the individual student. Further, they are freer to establish human contact with their students in a mutual and interdependent relationship. Such acts of friendship can, and do, provide interpersonal experiences and learnings of a particularly rich and rewarding nature.

Tutorials have the potential of going beyond the curriculum to develop more than intellectual and scholastic skills. Various forms of cultural enrichment are possible within a teaching framework that recognizes the total needs of the child, and seeks to cross the gap between two cultures. In many cities tutorials are including trips to sports events, concerts, movies and plays in order to take youngsters out of the encapsulated ghettos to other areas of the urban complex. This is one more example of activities that are impossible for most inner city teachers to accomplish with thirty children in the class.

Since the tutors are usually young people, they can work without the age gap that separates so many teachers from their students' experiences, and vice versa. This permits tutors to respond more easily to their tutees' age-related behaviors. Further, most tutors volunteer because of some substantial commitment to change existing patterns of racial and class prejudice in America. As a result of their similarity in age and status, and because of their clear commitment to the welfare of their student, rather than to a text or curriculum or order, tutors are more likely to respond sympathetically to the needs and situation of the disadvantaged youngster.

⁴ By no means do I imply that all tutorials are committed to these goals or operate in this manner. Rather, this is their potential, in some cities or neighborhoods more nearly realized than in others.

A final area in which tutors have special advantages lies in working with those elements of self-esteem and personal identity that have been marred by political and community impotence and disorganization. In some cities tutors have focused their energies on neighborhood action projects and block programs. Where tutoring attends to community needs and neighborhood organization, disadvantaged youngsters may find meaningful political activity a source of communion and potency, thus erasing the lessons of powerlessness brought about by traditions of political irresponsibility, segregation and paternalism.

In summary, tutorials can teach content lessons, contact lessons, and personal growth lessons; all of which are important and none of which is in any systematic or broadly successful way being taught to disadvantaged youngsters by schools and school systems now. As suggested earlier, in urban schools disadvantaged youngsters typically learn failure in content matter, make little positive or intimate contact with the representatives of the adult, white, middle class culture, and continue to develop the societally induced feelings of low self-esteem, low aspiration, and personal as well as community powerlessness.

A Challenge for Educators

Much of what has been described as the rationale and design for tutorials represents innovations in the content and management of educational systems. Certainly the fact that young people are actively involved in using education as a medium for bridging racial and class differences is new. Yet many of these designs represent extensions of well tested and well considered programs that are indeed difficult to administer in the context of a large and complex urban

bureaucracy. For a variety of reasons, educational administrators, policymakers, principals, teachers and counselors may see the tutorial as a threat to their own professional concerns and status, or to their own notions about educational propriety.

The tutors are teaching without certification or credentials, and often without formal training of any kind. In many cases they will not be supervised by trained teachers or other educators. As they attempt to relate to the needs of the individual youngster on the human and spiritual, as well as academic plane, the tutors may innovate on, and even go beyond, established curricular materials. Further, such teaching may be done in an informal atmosphere, and the student's fear of failure may be mitigated by a lack of rigid standards of performance and tests or examinations. Finally, tutors may engage in value inquiry or value training that seeks to inform and commit the tutee to certain aspects of his world. It is possible that such training may be seen by some as un-educational or as improper education.

One pattern of response to these possibilities may involve hindering tutorial efforts on any or many of the stated grounds. Administrative hindering may take the form of demanding that only qualified teachers tutor, that school personnel supervise, that sessions be held in school buildings or classrooms, and that certain texts and none others be used. Further, hindering may take the form of outright political warfare, with professionals attempting publicly to discredit tutors and their efforts to point out and treat some of the problems of the American society. Sometimes a teacher may even refuse to cooperate in working with a tutor who is helping a child in his class.

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College of Education trainees who spent the Spring Quarter in Cleveland say "No!" Let us put this in the words of one of the trainees, who spoke in the final seminar of the quarter somewhat as follows:

Before we went into this project we were told that these youngsters show little interest in learning, that they do not like to learn or care to know. In my judgment this just isn't so. I have seen too much delight in learning and too much satisfaction with success to believe it. The secret is in the way these young people are approached. They must be met on their own terms. I have seen the same pupil perform as a star in one class and become an immediate discipline problem to his teacher of the very next period.

This same observer went on to report on the field trip of a science class to an arboretum some miles from the school. The adult guide spoke at first in simple terms, saving her technical language for more sophisticated visitors. Following her explanation of the second plant, however, one of the eighth grade boys stepped forward, apologizing for his intrusion, corrected a technical error the guide had made, gave the Latin name for the bush, and explained some of its idiosyncrasies which had previously been omitted. From there on out the excursion was conducted on a different, and higher, plane.

The young people and the sponsors involved in this project appear to have gained certain insights which might indicate that the toughness of such schools has been overdrawn: (a) Practically all human beings have vast stores of untapped potential which awaits only the knowledgeable person who knows how to take the lid off. (b) The culturally disadvantaged require the same general education as others, but they must be met by a willingness to start where they are

and they must be moved by a pedagogy meaningful to them. (c) Success is undergirded by a bond of faith which embraces and binds together learner and teacher, giving hope and satisfaction to both. (d) The delights and satisfactions of learning are no less coveted by the culturally disadvantaged than by other segments of society. Indeed, such satisfactions may be more genuine and more lasting than among those sophisticated youth who apparently already have been everywhere and seen everything.

Tutors—Chesler

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Yet many educators may seek to help, despite whatever professional reservations they may have. Right now, the tutorial programs are doing a job the schools cannot do without major structural reform and redistribution of funds and facilities. Hindering the tutorials would be a blow at the ultimate goals of the urban educational system, and an exacerbation of the gaps and ills that have led to the growth of tutorials. Help may take many forms, and some of the most needed aids include: procurement of resources such as texts and other materials for the tutors to use if they wish; offers of aid in training or teaching tutors how to teach—given their unique goals and styles; and offering collaboration on records and consultation with teachers who are working with the same tutee.⁵ It would be a marvelous enrichment of the teaching team to have a college tutor join one or two teachers to discuss the growth potentials of a disadvantaged youngster.

One of the main differences between acts that hinder or help, is the attitude of

⁵ These examples are drawn from actual cases in such cities as Boston, Massachusetts; Hartford, Connecticut; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Detroit, Michigan.

the professional educator. As long as the professional demands that tutorial programs conform to his notions of the "way things should be done," he cannot but injure the integrity of the tutors and the possibilities of collaboration. The tutors receive their own rewards for their work; primary among them is the joy of independent work for meaningful social goals. When this work is bureaucratized under the direction of adult professionals it is no longer an independent venture.

Tutorial programs can collaborate with school systems, but they cannot be an arm or agency of such systems. They are independent and their independence must be cherished as one of the appeals to both tutors and disadvantaged youngsters. As independent agents they challenge the educational system to change, to reform, to help do the job the tutorials are doing. They challenge the educational system to reform in order better to meet the needs of disadvantaged racial, economic and cultural minorities. As educators we can appreciate this challenge.

Motivation—Frymier & Thompson

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