A Method to His Mastery
James Comer’s Enigmatic Model for School Success

Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today’s Youth for Tomorrow’s World
By James P. Comer, M.D.
Foreword by Henry Louis Gates Jr.
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As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Leave No Child Behind is the most recent and perhaps the fullest account of Professor James Comer’s approach to the improvement of schools and education. All of the competing models for school improvement that have been developed and in various degrees implemented in the past few decades have distinctive features, but the School Development Program (SDP), or the Comer process, as it is also called, is unique: it is apparently indifferent to specifics of curriculum.

But is it after all not a distinctive approach to curriculum—traditional or progressive, intensive or relaxed, free or prescribed, pluralistic or monistic—that characterizes the various competitive models for enhancing school achievement? So how do we define or characterize the Comer process? Some years ago, a proposed model for school achievement labeled Atlas, which brought together the approaches of Theodore Sizer, Howard Gardner, the Educational Development Corporation, and Comer’s SDP, received funding in a competitive process to develop the model and implement it in various schools. It was easy enough, from their works and products, to describe what the first three approaches were, and curriculum loomed large in all of them. But I became perplexed when I tried to understand the content of the Comer approach.

To enhance learning, Comer does not recommend any particular content as much as “relationships, relationships, relationships.” “Good relationships among and between the people that influence the quality of child life, largely home and school, make good child and adolescent rearing and development possible. Good relationships make student, adult, and organizational development possible, which in turn makes a strong academic focus possible.” But note how far down the line the “academic focus” comes in this characterization of his approach. Indeed, as Dr. Comer takes us through his interesting and varied experiences in trying to improve schooling and education for children who are generally at the bottom in school achievement, we discover that, in contrast to some other models, his does not aim at or expect any rapid improvement in achievement. I should emphasize at the beginning that Comer is not indifferent to achievement; it is a key objective of his emphasis on relationships and psychological development. He knows achievement is essential to functioning in today’s society, and the book has an extensive chapter on the ramifications of failure in school achievement for life, health, and income. But he knows it will take a while to see any improvement in achievement as he builds his foundation of relationships.

From Indiana to the Ivy League
Dr. Comer began working with two New Haven schools in 1968. He came from a working-class black family in East Chicago, Indiana, earned medical and public health degrees, worked in various settings as a child psychiatrist, and had pondered problems of dysfunctional child development. He leapt at the opportunity offered by Yale’s Child Study Center to go into two elementary schools in New Haven on a Ford Foundation program.”The schools were thirty-second and thirty-third out of thirty-three in the city on standardized achievement tests. They had the worst attendance. The student behavior problems were overwhelming.... The almost completely new staff brought in for the project was in disarray from the first day; almost all were gone by the end of the year. My first reaction was that we had to change the environment; children
could not learn and develop in that chaotic situation.” After five years, one of the schools was dropped and replaced by another. “Eventually the two schools in our project achieved the third and fourth highest-level mathematics and language arts test scores and the best attendance in the city.” But it took seven years.

Building on the foundation of all he and his associates have learned over the years—they have since worked in almost a thousand schools—Dr. Comer writes that when they begin with a dysfunctional school they might expect improvement in five years. It is a rare administrator or public that is that relaxed in its expectations.

But just what do they do during those years of building relationships? One would like to know more than one learns from this book, but that would undoubtedly take detailed logs of daily actions and problems. The Comer process begins with a committee—teachers, administrators, parents, social agency workers, and, at the high-school level (which Dr. Comer does not discuss in this book), students. The committee considers ways of improving the school, and these could be very varied indeed. But the key, as Dr. Comer presents it, is that the members of the committee must not find fault with any of the participants (though there would seem to be much to find fault with), and they must operate by consensus. One has the impression that if this condition is not possible, the Comer group will simply withdraw. The process does not and cannot operate with conflict. It is very far from the Alinsky method or some other social change processes that look for and find a mobilizing grievance against authority. One hears little in this book about school bureaucracies and the difficulties they create for education reformers.

Dr. Comer does not think much of some of the approaches that are popular with many of the readers of this journal. He does not think school choice will do much, as many believe, for poor minority children. He does not think much of “merit-pay and high-stakes accountability, or ‘reward and punishment,’ to solve education problems.” One could enter into an argument with him on the basis of various studies, but Dr. Comer would not be easily moved. His approach is clinical, and one suspects he would be more convinced by what he sees in a school than by a proper scientific study comparing it with others. But in the end, as I have noted, yes, he would be in full agreement that there must be a payoff in academic achievement, and

What do they actually do in Comer process schools, aside from providing “vital environments and good experiences”? That achievement tests show whether there is such a payoff.

But what do they actually do in Comer process schools, aside from providing “vital environments and good experiences”? The first reference in this book to anything one might call a curriculum comes on page 150, where we learn of the development of a “Social Skills Curriculum for Inner-City Children” in 1977. “The goal was to better prepare students to be successful in school by introducing them to activity areas where they could learn and develop the skills needed to be successful in life.” Dr. Comer thinks highly of this curriculum, but there are no further details. The first reference to anything that one could call an academic curriculum comes on page 196, where Comer describes an “Essentials of Literacy” program. The six essential elements are “phonics, story sense, listening, guided reading, vocabulary, and writing.” The program “provides students with a safe, nurturing, highly stimulating, and rewarding environment in which to develop their literacy skills.” It seems to stand aside from the regular school curriculum.

The SDP has many success stories to tell, as well as cases where it had to withdraw from the school or where administrators and principals changed or abandoned support. The story is not very different from other school-reform models. Its successes are based on committed and energetic individuals and the inspiring role of Dr. Comer himself. Some claim to be proof against individual variation and effectiveness, but that would be far from Dr. Comer’s approach. Clearly this is an interesting man, with a program that has been attractive to many schools. One would still like to know just what they do, and after this book this reader, at least, is still somewhat at sea.

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