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Looking within the community for best means of social change

By Hugh Lacey
and Maria Ines Lacey

Paulo Freire, the famous Brazilian educator who died on May 2 at the age of 75, has left a rich legacy.

His 1970 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has inspired educational projects in poor communities throughout the world, including many in the United States. Initially, his fame came from having remarkable success in teaching literacy to peasants in northeastern Brazil. Later, his methods were adapted to reach others with little direction or motivation in their lives, who have been bypassed in their schooling and who are suffering cultural deprivation and lack of self-esteem.

Freire criticized common education methods as reflecting the "banking" rather than the "problem-solving" conception of education. The key to his own method is "conscientization," or "the raising of critical awareness." For him, people learn — are educated — at the same time as they come to take charge of their lives and communities. Learning and empowerment go hand in hand. People are motivated to learn when they see that learning is efficacious.

Freire spoke of the "efficacious word." As one learns to put words onto one's experience and realities, to describe and to explain them, one begins to be able to express aspirations for the future and to sense that life and the realities of community can be transformed. Freire's methods assume that everyone has the potential to develop a critical awareness and to become an agent of social change.

So learning occurs when people gather to support one another, struggling to address the ever-present crises or to solve their day-to-day problems. It could be about getting rid of drugs on street corners, securing a safe environment where children can play, improving parenting skills, helping youngsters stay in school, creating affordable housing, cleaning parks and playgrounds, planning celebrations, developing ideas about creating businesses, or finding new sources of employment.

Together, as they tackle obstacles and confront problems, members of a community begin to value their strengths and resources — their habits of helping each other, their

abilities as organizers and planners, their insights into what needs to be done. At the same time, they begin to see the connections between their struggles and those that their ancestors faced and overcame. Celebrations of historical events and significant leaders become an important way both to strengthen their spiritual lives and to develop a language for talking about their own struggles.

As community members reflect, discuss and write, putting their own words onto their experiences and realities, coming to understand how society works, they slowly discover that they are intelligent sources of

ing, low-skill jobs with no benefits reflect policies that are indifferent to the well-being of poor people.

Training? Yes. But if jobs are not available, it is demoralizing. Job creation and relevant training programs are necessary. But what kind of training and for what jobs? Who should decide?

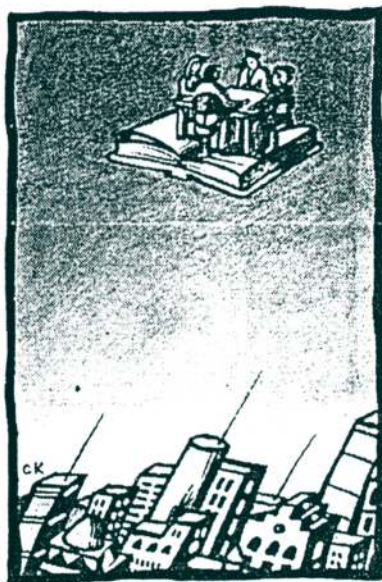
Freire's methods point to a way at getting at these questions constructively. The focus must be on jobs, to be created and made available in the community, that will contribute to meeting the needs of the community and to its positive transformation. That focus can arise only out of the critical and ongoing discussions of community members themselves.

Think of a woman in a "women's self-help group" in a public housing development in the city of Chester who gained the confidence to study early childhood education and computers and to form employment goals that use her strengths and serve the community's needs.

In contrast, in the interest of reducing the welfare rolls, thousands of residents of Pennsylvania are being declared "job ready." Many of them are young mothers who lack a high school diploma and marketable skills. They are denied the opportunity for further training and education that could fit them for a career of their choice. Rather than gaining employment that is responsive to the needs of their communities, they are being set up to remain in a never-ending cycle of poverty, going from one low-pay and low-skill job to the next, with periods of unemployment interspersed, allowing little possibility for personal growth.

Welfare reform that could enable people to take charge of their lives and have lasting effects can be enacted only if everyone's potential to be a constructive participant in the process of change is recognized, and programs are generated to make it a reality. Creating and providing jobs and raising of critical awareness through the mastery of people's powers of expression must be integral components of one and the same process. That is Paulo Freire's legacy to the United States.

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change, not "problems" to be managed, as the welfare reform debates often suggest. They have something to say — and do — concerning all the problems that surround them: drugs, broken spirits, violence, housing, single-parenthood, the care of older citizens and children, jobs. Unfortunately, social policy tends to be made without regard to the wealth of ideas and resources that can emerge when critical awareness is raised in poor communities.

Freire's methods are highly pertinent in the present context of welfare reform. It has been said that welfare reform is to get rid of the state of "dependency" to which millions have succumbed because of the provision of "handouts."

What is really needed to enable poor people to take charge of their lives?

Jobs? Yes. But dead-end, low-pay-

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