

The 2007 Grawemeyer Award in Education Speech Introduction of James P. Comer, M.D. by David Reynolds, Professor Emeritus, University of Exeter

It is a very great pleasure and an honor to say a few words, and they will be a few words about Professor Comer, and the reasons why we chose this particular book (*Leave No Child Behind*) and in many ways it is a book that exemplifies a tremendous contribution and a tremendous life of scholarship.

There are actually three judges on the International Committee, there is Sam (Stringfield) and there is Larry Cuban—I don't know if Larry is here today—and there is myself representing all the non-American nations of the world. It's 227, and I try. The reasons why we should say that last year we were unanimous, and this year we were unanimous, which isn't to say we didn't discuss and we didn't argue, but the decision was unanimous for both years.

Basically I think the importance of Professor Comer's work and his contribution is as follows. We are really talking about the School Development Program which he took from two schools, I think, in 1968 and has built into, I think, into four figures in schools currently and the school improvement design which is achieving huge effects and transforming children's life chances.

So what is the marvelous content of Professor Comer's work? Firstly, it's wholistic in the sense that it deals with all of the aspect of children's development. It isn't fixated on test scores as some governments, many governments, indeed some educational researchers, are. It looks at children, as it were, in the round. It looks at the affect it looks at the emotional. It looks beyond simple academic outcomes measures. In fact, it looks beyond outcomes measures, and actually wants to get into the study of things like school processes. So it's wholistic in a world, which in many ways, isn't. Secondly, the work is about pulling all levers that might affect the outcomes and processes within schools.

It is remarkable to see the evolution of the School Development Program over time because almost everything that we could take from the school effectiveness and school improvement communities Professor Comer has been doing. There are parent programs. There are reading programs. There are management initiatives. There are interventions of the level of the community. Virtually every single body of knowledge, which would lead to a lever, Professor Comer and the School Development Program pulls.

And then the great thing about this use of multiple levers is you stand a chance of getting the interaction effects which you don't get clearly if you are doing just one thing or two things. And I think reading through the book and looking at the success of the program is those interaction effects are doing an awful lot of things which individually may have quite small effects, which potentially together

have much larger effects – larger effects, which actually marks out the quality of the program.

Thirdly, Professor Comer's work, while sits theoretically informed, is empirically based. Whilst being aware of the difficulties clearly of measuring everything and sometimes difficulties clearly of measuring what matters, the School Development Program has been built by studying which bits of it worked, and crucially, and here is the honesty, which bits of it didn't. The context in which it worked, the context in which it didn't; the necessity of adding new bits in certain contexts to make it work. It was built out of careful empirical study about what worked. It wasn't just produced by theory, even though it was theoretically informed.

And, if you look at most school improvement, I would say the great majority of school improvement, it is nothing like Professor Comer's work. It often basically doesn't evaluate what it does. Often what it does seems to owe more to the needs of the individuals to have better hearts or better souls or feel better about themselves than actually the need to improve the outcomes and processes of schooling. And very often in school improvement, people just worship in different churches. They go out performing...oh, some call it acts of...random acts of human kindness, with no measure about whether they work or not, and go back happy. Well, Professor Comer worships at a very different kind of church. It is a church called truth, and I think that has marked out the quality of his work and that of the program.

Fourthly, I think Professor Comer shows the value of sticking at a patch and tilling the ground over and over and over again, and not moving on when things are tough. There are descriptions in this book, in *Leave No Child Behind*, about test scores, which remains stubbornly rooted to the ground. About problems that the projects run in to. And very often people respond to that by going to do something else. A different kind of research project, or going to a different geographical area. And Professor Comer really for a long time was in one area, and for a long, long time has been in this one field affecting a school improvement design, which can truly help the world's children.

And last likely, the great thing – and it was brought back to me really in the book again just recently – the great thing about Professor Comer and his work is the intellectual and personal honesty with it. I have never seen anybody write down the list of research grants he had which were unfortunately discontinued by various stupid foundations in the way that Professor Comer does. And which of us has said: look we ran into problems here because we had no money...we were scurrying around trying to...which of us has said we were scurrying around trying to find new sums of money to keep this going. That degree of intellectual honesty is very, very marked. And you compare that with, how shall I put it, the self-promotion of academics, the pitching, the simplifying, the hiding of things because they won't fit into a media sound bite or won't appeal to government.

And you read this book of total intellectual and personal honesty and it is really very, very striking.

I'll conclude just on a, it's an English, I was going to say football, it's actually soccer. It's an English soccer story about probably the greatest football player of all time. If you heard of him called Martin Peters? That's interesting. It's a good thing that makes the point of the story better I hope. It's interesting that you haven't. But you haven't because he was –he played for the England World Cup Team, sorry the United Kingdom World Cup Team in 1966, and I think we won it, and he was probably the greatest footballer ever. And people said of him, the trouble with Martin Peters, it's why you haven't heard of him, like you heard of Pele and people like that. The reason you would not have heard of him is that people said of him he was twenty years before his time. He was just too good. And what would happen is that Martin Peters would be out on the pitch, and he would play a pass, he'd do a soccer pass. And he'd play the ball over there and, heck, there was no one there to receive the pass, because the rest of the teammates weren't thinking through that's where the ball is going to go. He was just ahead of the game.

And I think basically, Professor Comer is, in a sense, your American Peters. And it is taking time I think for people to, as it were, run on to the pass that Professor Comer has been making all those year about wholistic, about a full range of children's needs being addressed, about pulling all levers, about careful empiricism.

And I think basically, it's taken the dysfunctional society, which we increasingly inhabit, the absence of mesh, the absence of community networks, the fragmented nature of modern society to make it clear that his approach because of its emphasis on the social and the community as well as the academic, is one maybe even the only one that can save your public education and public education around the world from the creeping privatization, from the differentiation into different settings with different cultures, and ethos as it seems. And I think basically old Mr. Grawemeyer would be very pleased as we all should be for this recognition of the tremendous work of a lifetime's achievement to education, society, and the world in general...James Comer.

Thank you very much.