

THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

BY

NAOMI COHEN

A Personal Memoir of the New York City Public School System 1924-1976

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1924-1976	3
Whatever Happened to Discipline?	6
The Evolution of Theory and Practice	8
Things Come and Go 12	15
Space for the Junior High School 16	19
P.S. 103	22
The Culture Gap and How It Wasn't Handled 26	
The Puerto Rican Study	30
Integration and the Neighborhood School	35
Substitute in Spanish Harlem	40
Substitute in Black Harlem	43
Black Heritage	47
Through the Eyes of the Substitute	50
Final Reflections	53

1924-1976

It was in the fall of 1924 that I was introduced to the New York City school system as a first grader, unceremoniously set down in a learning environment that was impersonal, demanding, well disciplined, often frightening, often confusing but usually interesting. Life in the public schools seemed to me to follow an unchanging course throughout the entire period of my experience as a student.

Changes began occurring when my own children entered the public schools of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and I became an “active,” “concerned” parent. From 1945 onward, both as parent and as teacher, I lived through a succession of crises, through boycotts and rebellions, through see-saw like changes, through endless fundings and withdrawals of funding, through successes and through failures and, with it all, a continuing ability to recuperate and keep going because of the special New York quality of its children and its teachers.

In 1945 the issue was the inadequacy of the antiquated buildings: rolling doors, bathrooms in the outside yard, a single water fountain for the entire school. The agenda of the Parents Association in those years was dominated by the word “toilets.” The objective of providing such facilities on each floor of P.S. 165 was achieved by the end of the decade, to the joy of the parents and the ecstasy of the plumbing company that got the job.

In the fifties the Puerto Rican immigration led to research and findings which probed the problems of the unsuccessful learner, focused mainly on the “language handicap” as though it were a new experience for the city schools. Emphasis on the learning of English and a prohibition against the use of Spanish in the classroom prevailed without success until it gave way in the seventies to the demand for bilingual education.

In the last half of the fifties I moved onto the other side of the barricades and embarked on a teaching career. From Teachers College I acquired a Master's Degree in Childhood Education, some useful knowledge and a lot of worthless theory, plus a varied and extensive exposure to public and private school teaching. The latter greatly lowered my preconceived admiration for expensive schools with glorious reputations, and turned me into a missionary for New York City's schools as a place to educate children who could afford an alternative as well as for those who had no such choice.

The birth of a third child brought back the role of full-time mother and from 1962 to 1964, I served as President of the Parents Association of P.S. 165, an

experience that convinced me to resume my substitute's license and become a teacher again.

The sixties were embittered by the integration struggle and characterized by the departure of the middle class whites; a fact which made the mandated goal of 50-50 proportions a numerical absurdity. This gave way at the end of the decade to the demand for self expression and self determination via community control, emphasis on ethnicity, the study of black heritage and related academic and structural changes.

The sixties are also memorable for the Teachers Strike of 1968. The union leadership, more than the constituents, viewed the conflict as a typical problem of organized labor, demanding more money and a strengthening of the apparatus of union organization. As a result of the strike, the profession of teaching joined the ranks of skilled labor, complete with salary increases, seniority regulations, grievance procedures, fringe benefits, and a recurrent recourse to the strike threat.

The civil rights advocates viewed the strike as a racist assault on emerging black power. The conventional alliance of labor and the liberals was dealt a serious blow, leaving the ideologues of the left and the concerned parent groups bruised and baffled.

The union was triumphant, but it appears to have been a pyrrhic victory because the financial crisis in the city led to massive dismissals of teachers and to drastic cuts in services. To some extent teachers became alienated from the public because a strike was regarded by many as a breach of professional responsibility and the gains for the teachers came at a time of serious decline in academic achievement. Thousands of teachers are out of work, dozens of hopeful programs are doomed for lack of money. Yet there is little outcry against a serious situation, and little public support for the embattled schools.

When it comes to criticism, the New York City school system is fair game. It comes from all quarters, with or without knowledge of the facts, with a desire to help or a desire to hurt.

Those who embarked on their school careers in the twenties are prone to nostalgic assertions that schools used to be better. Those who look back this way remember the quiet, studious, respectful attitude that they and their classmates brought to school from home. So they say it was better and protest that the schools have deteriorated.

But which of these protestors would be happy to leave his child in Miss Peterson's first grade class of 1924? Would they accept school conditions which put fifty children in one classroom and two children in one shared seat with one

screwed-down desk for both of them? Would they adjust to the will of the system as our parents did? Would their children, products of a very different world, adjust to the will of the teacher as we did?

Perhaps the nostalgic longing for a by-gone classroom is simply irrelevant.

What Ever Happened To Discipline?

Few of its graduates would dispute the assertion that the atmosphere of my grade school was oppressive. The extent to which this fact caused its students pain depended upon individual capacity to crumble under the weight of authority. Fear was the effective tool for pushing knowledge into all heads, willing or unwilling.

Fear of what? Well, that's hard to say. We all knew that corporal punishment was strictly forbidden, and we boasted to each other that if the teacher laid a finger on us, our parents would take her straight to court. This was probably true. In any event, we had nothing to fear in the way of physical assault. The source of the teacher's power was something mysterious that we simply accepted without really thinking about it.

The First Grade had me scared out of my wits.

One day I had gone half way to school when a terrifying image loomed up in my mind - my handkerchief still lying on the dresser of my room. Hoping desperately for the impossible, I reached into my pocket and discovered that there was no way out. I stood on the corner impaled on the horns of a dilemma. If I went home for it I would be late; if I continued on I would fail "morning inspection." I stood there confused and crying bitterly, until a total stranger came to my rescue with his own tremendous clean handkerchief.

My problem was solved. All that remained to be sorted out in my six-year-old code of right and wrong was the fact that I now possessed a handkerchief which did not belong to me and which I could not possibly return.

Life was full of such problems for the young children of the twenties.

Thanks to fear (and perhaps to a lack of imagination) I reached the third grade without running afoul of established authority. But then, after three years of watching other sinners weeping in the corner, I was at last sent there myself, and it was at that time and place that I began my study of discipline. I stood there and thought to myself in astonishment, "There is nothing in this corner, absolutely nothing." I really didn't know what to do about this momentous discovery. The whole class was awaiting the customary flood. I was neither frightened nor ashamed, but I knew that my peers were not ready for silent stoicism. Moreover, I hoped that if I acted in the expected manner, a boy named Henry would walk me home and comfort me. I cried and he did.

Some thirty years later I was teaching a third grade class when, desperate for some way to control a particularly difficult child, I ordered him into the corner.

Not only did he go willingly, but before my astonished eyes, the entire class moved toward the back of the room with him, shouting gleefully, “Teacher, can I go in the corner too?”

How can the poor teacher cope with something like that? And something like that goes on all the time. What happened? How did the frightened child of yesterday become today's untouchable master of one-upmanship?

Forget, for the moment, all the theories of the liberal sociologist (poverty, alienation, discrimination etc) or, on the other hand, the theories of the conservatives (permissiveness, Spock inspired training, lack of school prayer etc.) and consider only the behavior itself.

Discipline is a mystique. It only works when all parties to it believe in it. As long as the children were willing to play the teacher's game, order could be maintained with only a minimum of punishment. The real source of discipline was in the children themselves, their fear of the adult world as something distinct from their own world, and their concern with distinguishing right from wrong. The children of the twenties, like most generations before them, were driven to be on the side of the angels while, paradoxically, harboring a secret admiration for the kid who had the guts to get D in Conduct.

The Evolution of Theory and Practice

In spite of extensive research and experiment and innovation in the many areas of education, the basic skills inevitably remain what schooling is all about. The "3R's" must still be dealt with while the enlightened profession continues its search through various methods for an acceptable alternative to the "hickory stick."

Writing

As soon as Class IA was settled into its seats, we were launched on our school careers. I was immediately faced with the first academic task of my life. I had to copy my name in script from a slip of paper which was handed to me. I thought it was too hard for me, and I was probably right, but everyone around me was writing so I did too.

By the time my children entered school, in the late 40's "script" had become "cursive" and the teaching of it delayed until the third grade. Some private school students of that period never learned it at all, and still, as adults, have to print everything they write.

I have never understood why so much inhibition about the teaching of writing took hold of educators. When I entered the teaching field as a student in the fifties and as a teacher in the sixties, I was warned not to teach any kind of writing to the first grade children until they could read, and not to ask them to write anything they could not read. The prohibition was another one of those dogmas that accompanied the idea of sequence, the idea that one skill must precede the next because of immutable stages of development.

It seems that everyone loves to write on the blackboard, teachers and students alike. It is a fact that children generally like to copy material and it is also a fact that a few minutes of blessed quiet can usually be obtained by giving the class a writing assignment. As a learning task, writing is something that most children can master, whether it involves printing or script, and it gives even the poor learners a chance to see a successful product of their own efforts. True, the written material that turns up in some notebooks is quite beyond the reading ability of the child but I doubt if that does them any great harm. In any case, some children learn to read by writing while others learn from something else. The more approaches the child is exposed to, the greater the chance of hitting the one that will touch him as an individual. However, some children have emotional problems with writing which are difficult to understand or to deal with.

In 1962 at P.S. 165 we introduced after-school violin lessons to a group of twelve children. One of the pupils in this school was the source of heart-break to his teachers. Pedro was a poverty stricken child whose father had two complete families and took turns living in each. This boy had seven brothers and sisters in his home, all of them miserable and most of them unusually bright.

Pedro had reached the fifth grade without ever writing anything at all. He simply refused to take a pencil in his hand, and as a result, he was lagging far behind his potential. We provided a 'violin scholarship for him to cover the 50-cent lessons and the cost of renting the violin. One day the violin teacher, who knew nothing about Pedro's academic history, told me that he had been teaching some music theory and all the children, including Pedro, had done very well at writing scales. He cited Pedro in particular because he had written at a furious pace, as though he were starving for the experience. I wish I could say that the writing barrier was broken for Pedro in the violin class, but it's not true. It was the last time that Pedro ever took a pencil in his hand in that school.

Arithmetic

As a graduate student at Teachers College I was introduced to meaningful arithmetic and only then did I finally begin to make sense of the computing and problem solving I had been doing for three decades. As a child I never understood what I was doing although I managed by hook or by crook, and without cheating, to pass the subject each term without distinction. I was not one of the lucky ones who had an intuitive sense of numbers and I often had the panicky feeling that the teacher's words made sense to the rest of the class but not to me.

In today's classrooms great stress is placed on the underlying principles of computation in terms of the base of ten and the place system. As children we were taught to name the columns, the ones, the tens, the hundreds and so on, but that never helped me carry out the procedures. For that I was completely dependent on rote learning of computation methods. I actually enjoyed doing the examples once I had mastered the technique and I don't think I minded too much doing something I didn't understand as long as I got the right answer.

My favorite activity in arithmetic was the multiplication and division of fractions. My understanding of this was no better than my understanding of addition and subtraction of fractions, but it was much pleasanter because the steps were clear, and I crossed out numerators and denominators with a wild abandon.

Whatever success I achieved in arithmetic, and it was mighty little, is attributable to a series of meaningless verbalizations by which I guided my pencil. I “borrowed” and “paid back” in subtraction; I “carried” from one column to the

other. I also did a great deal of “adding on,” “bringing down” and “indenting.” Some of the things I brought down were the zeros in all the operations and the next number in the dividend of a division problem. I “added on” zeros to multiply by ten, one hundred and so on. I “indented” in multiplication. In a completely mechanical way I counted the number of decimal places in the numbers I started with, and then counted an equivalent number of places moving from right to left until my decimal point was strategically placed. The reason for this was a total mystery, but it was one of the easiest tasks I ever learned to do since it involved nothing more than counting.

In division I was forever moving things over somewhere when decimals and zeros were involved. In general I was grateful for zeros wherever they appeared because I always seemed to have some handy device that I could apply to the situation.

It is my impression that arithmetic has fared better than other parts of the curriculum. The children do not seem to be as overwhelmed by the mysteries of the subject as they used to be. The whole business of experimentation and evaluation, so essential to intelligent innovation, was able to proceed without the burden of emotional involvement from the public sector, perhaps because so few adults really understand even simple mathematics and so many are afraid to go anywhere near it. The first New Math came and went without stirring up much more than some very funny comments by Tom Lehrer, and left in its wake a genuine concern for children's feelings about learning, and a sober evaluation of the whole concept of concrete versus abstract approaches to mathematics.

I was fascinated by the understanding I gained in Professor Fehr's course in Teaching Mathematics in the Elementary School at Teachers College, and I know that my reaction was widely shared by other members of the class. I suspect that children still divide up into those that understand math and those that don't but learn it anyway. The new teaching of concepts may save some who would have been lost without it or, as some claim, it may confuse some who were better off with a mechanical rote approach. I just don't know. However, I am sure that the teachers understand it better and that their ease with it is an enormous aid to effective teaching.

Reading

The *bête noir* of the school system is the reading instruction. The word conjures up associations with tests and scores, with failure of teachers, failure of students and failure of methods. What should be a joy is too often just an

accomplishment, a skill to be mastered. The treats of the past have, in many instances, become the agonies of the present.

I treasure the memory of the four members of my family seated in our small living room, all of us absorbed in books or magazines. The furniture was shabby and showed signs of heavy and permissive use; the decor was not worth remembering, but the lamplight was. There were only a few bookshelves around the apartment. Books were for reading, not for collecting or displaying, and so we went back and forth to the library, sharing our treasures with the public at large and exploring an endless variety of material. There were no restrictions. Our parents did not censor or even judge.

To me the word "reading" recalls joyous hours at home and at school, but today the word has been swallowed up in a sea of anxiety. In my day both illiterate and educated parents assumed that the school would teach their children how to read.

It is understandable that parents of today, who do not have sufficient educational background to supplement their children's education at home, should feel great anxiety about the much publicized inability of the schools to teach this skill even before it happens, and to express great anger over the failure of the school in this respect after it happens.

Much less understandable is the anxiety of the well educated parents about various approaches to the teaching of reading. Too often they find themselves caught up in concerns about this subject that never even occurred to their own parents. The anxiety arose partly from the wide publicity given to unsatisfactory reading scores and partly to changes in method and the emotional debate that followed in their wake. Gradually, instruction in reading descended from the heights of literary adventure to the uninspired level of exercise, with planned progress from one small aspect of skill to the next.

One step in this descent came with an idea developed by "experts" that the stories in the readers were not reaching the children because they were too remote from their everyday lives. What followed was an insult to children's imagination known as the "here and now" approach. Animals that talked or lost their mittens gave way to a dog named Spot whose uninspired antics were entirely predictable and within the realm of reason. Pandora and her terrifying box gave way to healthy little children who made a big thing of going to the toy store.

As reading achievement declined and the black protest movement zeroed in on education, the here and now readers ran into trouble. The children were white, usually blonde and blue eyed; their families were intact and just the right size; their

houses were white frame private homes with romping space for the well fed dog. What kind of here and now was that for the child in a city slum?

So the experts went back to work to make the readers more here and nowish for the inner city children. Black faces were introduced to the illustrations, just as they were being introduced to the doll corners of the kindergartens. Then the setting moved out of the suburbs and onto city streets.

This resulted in such awesome phrases as “many houses,” “many people,” “many buses” etc. Compared to what really goes on today on these city streets, the “stories” would hardly qualify as here and now. The houses are burning down, the drug sellers ply their trade in the open, the garbage is spilled all over, the pipes leak. Children who can tell you in a matter-of-fact way that their house burned and the baby died are not going to find much personal relationship to a pallid portrayal of a “ghetto” street.

The Teacher's Manual that accompanies the readers makes the skill training it promotes sound very effective. Everything is well coordinated; vocabulary development, phonetic configurations, etc. are carried from the text to the blackboard, to the experience charts all around the room and to the workbooks that go with the readers.

Still the problem persists and I have grave doubts that there is much merit in this kind of skill training as the foundation of the reading program. However good it may be, whatever it gains in scientific approach, it loses in the crushing boredom of the material. Certainly there is an important place for this training in school, but where, when, and how much is the question.

Another step, designed to improve reading ability, probably made the situation a good deal worse. This was called “readiness” but it was viewed by many disappointed parents as an excuse for not teaching, particularly for withholding instruction from black and Puerto Rican children.

When I was President of the Parents Association, a first grade teacher complained to me that her class, all black or Puerto Rican, had failed the reading readiness test and, consequently, her request for primers had been refused. With twenty years of teaching behind her she was perfectly capable of deciding when to start the formal teaching, even though the children in question had no talent for taking tests.

All kinds of ideas went along with the concept of readiness. The children had to be verbal before they could be literate. This meant that they had to speak up in class. The fact that they talked to each other all the time didn't count. Children who had had a wide experience in real life situations were deemed more ready than

others. In practice this meant that a child who flew in an airplane to Europe for the summer was ready, but a child who flew to Puerto Rico was not. The child who went to Maine for the summer was ready but the child who went back to the family farm in South Carolina for the summer was not. This was not always the case by any means, but the readiness concept often made it possible to justify prejudice and hold back in this way.

As always in the New York City school system, there was another side to it. There were children, many of them, who had absolutely no external experience, many who had never left the house before they entered school. I heard of one case of a child who had been kept under the bed for his entire five years so as not to cause any trouble to anyone. There were children who, in fact, needed a great deal of building up before they could learn anything. Moreover, no one would deny that some children must proceed more slowly than others.

Over the years my opinion wavered a "good deal between the two positions, finding verification first for one, and then for the other. I would not say that all the truth lay on one side or the other of the readiness argument, but it must be admitted that the parents who complained that education was withheld (in the sixties) because of prejudice had a point.

It was not just the sociology of the readers and the timing that came under attack, but also the method of instruction. A book called, "Why Johnny Can't Read" threw the parental multitude into a panic that their children would never learn the sound of the letters and would only be able to decipher the words in their readers.

Solutions to the "Reading Problem" usually concentrate on a target for attack as though all that is required is to spot the weak point and then reverse it. In this case, the Achilles heel of the reading program was identified as the "whole word approach."

The answer, then, to the reading failures was PHONICS, and it was presented as though it were something wholly different from the reading instruction actually being practiced in the classrooms of the city. If Johnny couldn't read it was not because his social condition alienated him from the content as the sociologists said, and not because his limited experience failed to stimulate an interest in stories as the elitist types said, and not because his father was so mean as the psychologists said and so on, but rather because he had been taught to recognize the word by its total appearance rather than by the sound of each letter.

In fact, the whole word approach was simply easier for a beginning reader who was already used to seeing words in their entirety. In fact, words are made up of letters and those children who became independent readers very quickly, had no

difficulty in sounding out unfamiliar words. In any event, phonics had never really been eliminated, but the timing and the stress were different enough to frighten the layman.

The phonics adherents had to face an immovable force, the English language itself; the archaisms of a centuries-old language. A movement to reform the spelling flourished for awhile and left some people writing nite and altho but it never really developed. The big news in the early 60's was the Augmented Roman Alphabet and it made such a big splash that for awhile it looked as though children would have to learn some extra made-up letters in the beginning and gradually drop them as their skill increased. The splash turned out to be just a sprinkle and soon disappeared down the drain.

After the teachers strike in 1968, an attempt was made to give the public a broader role in education through the institution of Community School Boards. This innovation, too, was predicted to reverse the trend toward reading failure. After the publication of reading scores revealed that community control was not the miraculous answer to the reading problem that it was supposed to have been, another culprit had to be found, and it turned out to be the tests themselves. The low scores were explained in a new way. The tests were said to put black and Puerto Rican children at a disadvantage because of the cultural bias of the questions. This viewpoint is still around but it is hard to defend because even if it is true, and that would be hard to substantiate, the culture represented is the culture in which the children will have to live and work, and success or failure in life will depend upon their ability to function in it.

I suppose that educators who devote their energies to improving methods must be commended for their sincere wish to help children, but they cannot have the control over children's learning that would be necessary to test any given approach. A teacher can only know how something is taught, not how it is learned. When I taught a first grade class in Harlem, I discovered on the first day that one boy could already breeze through a second grade reader. I spoke to him about his unique ability and I still remember the conversation: "How did you learn to read?" "My brother taught me". "How old is your brother?" "Seven."

Teachers are not limited to schools and classrooms and neither are learners. Competent teachers have always known this and no matter what method was prescribed at the moment, they have exposed children to anything that works.

A friend of mine who sent her children to parochial school once asked a nun how children learn to read. The answer came back in one word, "Magic". It is the most intelligent theory I have ever heard.

Things Come and Go

The difference between fashion and education is that everyone knows that what's in this year and out next year will probably come back to the stores later on. Few buyers feel compelled to empty their closets of everything that's not strictly up-to-date and replenish their wardrobes with the latest thing. If they do they are bound to reject articles that have not outlived their value.

In the field of education changes are not regarded as the fluctuations that they usually are, but are labeled "innovation" or something equally impressive, and are either applauded by the partisans or condemned by the opponents. Those who entered school in the 1920's are bound to remember experiences that seem to have disappeared from the current scene, along with those which lapsed and staged a dramatic comeback.

Assemblies

From the first grade on, regular formal assemblies were part of the curriculum of my school. The logistics were remarkably simple. When the time came, the class lined up on the side of its own room and waited for the given signal. When it came, the walls of the room were rolled away and eight classrooms were converted into an ample auditorium. As the walls rolled away, there came into view a raised platform, a piano, a huge American flag and a romantic portrait of Joan of Arc, the heroine for whom the school was named.

There was always a teacher who could play the piano, and it was to the tune of her music that we marched to our seats, standing at attention for the arrival of the color guard and the salute to the flag. More patriotism in the form of song, a reading from the Book of psalms and the formal routine was over, to be repeated in every assembly for nine full years.

In recent years, protests and court actions have either reduced or eliminated most of these proceedings out of respect for one ideology or another. No doubt there was justice in the decisions, but it seems a pity to deprive a school of the hushed silence that overcomes children when they come face-to-face with ceremony and reverence. .

For the rest of the assembly program, the talents of the children were the major resource. There were no lists of audiovisual programs and other professional

material to go through and choose. Someone came around to the classrooms and asked who would like to do what.

This was the period when children were prone to “take” after school. Some of the things they “took” were music lessons, ballet and elocution, the latter a dramatic approach to spoken English. I must have heard “The boy stood on the burning deck” hundreds of times, complete with perfect diction and the appropriate gestures and dynamics.

I never “took” ballet but I was intrigued by it. When they came around to the first grade asking for volunteers for the assembly program I eagerly offered to dance, and then promptly forgot all about it until the day of the assembly. It was not until I was actually standing at the back of the auditorium facing the piano up front, and presumably getting ready to make a grand entrance, that I realized that I had not the faintest idea what to do. My awful predicament was new to me, but not to the teachers, and with the help of a very kind pianist, I managed to flap around like a butterfly for a few seconds and beat a hasty retreat to my seat. Eventually the walls of the room rolled back, the assembly was over, the room was restored to an ordinary classroom and I was left with the awful memory of my short-lived dancing career.

The highlight of the fourth grade assemblies was the debates, completely formal, adhering to all the rules and requiring weeks of preparation. I was one of three girls chosen to defend 4B against three boys from 4A. The subject we had to deal with was, “The Pen is Mightier than the Sword.” The topic was chosen for us. It just was not the kind of thing children in the fourth grade are likely to think up for themselves.

The debate was such an important event that the parents of the contestants were invited. Both my father and mother came and smiled their encouragement to me from the platform in the front of the auditorium. As the last debater, it was my task to sum up the rebuttal for my team. It went beautifully and I sat down thoroughly convinced that I had it made. My confidence survived the summing up by my counterpart in 4A. I was sure that the pen had it, but then after paying tribute to the power of the pen and its great influence, that beast of a boy declaimed in heroic tones, “But when his country calls, the writer puts down his pen and picks up his sword.”

The audience was electrified, applauding wildly and endlessly, all except for my parents who were pacifists and were not happy to see their daughter done in by a nine-year-old chauvinist. The debate was over, the walls went back where they

belonged and I was left with my defeated pen and a very gloomy view of war which has lasted all my life.

At my graduation from the ninth grade, the walls of my classroom were rolled back for the ceremony that ended my education at P.S. 93. It was my last experience with rolling walls and doors until my first child entered P.S. 165 in 1945. The building was a relic of the last century, built like a castle instead of a box. The ceilings were enormous, the brass door knobs works of art, the toilets inadequate and the classrooms equipped with walls that rolled back to form an auditorium.

There were still a number of schools in the city which retained these antique features, and active parents were busy attacking the architecture as an impediment to learning. For some reason or other, enormous pressure was brought on the Board of Education to get rid of the rolling doors and substitute the solid walls that everyone knew were an essential feature of modern education. At P.S. 165 the parents succeeded and money was drawn from the capital budget to modernize the school in this fashion.

In 1955, as a graduate student in Teachers College, I went with my class to see what money and brains and innovation can do for the education of children fortunate enough to live in the rich suburbs. The school we visited was certainly a delight to behold and had many worthy features, but the greatest source of pride was the walls of the classrooms that rolled away, miraculously forming an instant auditorium.

Latin

At the end of the fourth grade the boys left P.S. 93 and the girls, who were expected to grow up to be nothing more than housewives and mothers, were forced to pursue their studies in the cloistered atmosphere of an all-girls school.

From the seventh through the ninth grade we were taught Latin by Mrs. Marshall - tall, very thin, long black hair tied in an unfashionable bun, and totally nuts about Latin. She and her husband were so devoted to the language that they spoke it at home, not only to each other but to their four year old daughter as well.

Mrs. Marshall taught us Latin as a living language, and we actually spoke it in her class. We were greeted in the morning and dismissed in the afternoon in the ancient tongue. She translated a lullaby from English into Latin and made us memorize it in the hope, I am sure, that the day would come when a Latin version of "Sweet and Low" would prove to be just what we needed.

For the Christmas party we wrote and acted out an original play, a modern comedy in a dead language. Mrs. Marshall presided over the refreshments, mixing up some watery brew in a punch bowl and talking about the ingredients and the procedure as though she were in a Roman kitchen.

Latin was still being taught as the first foreign language of the curriculum in many schools, both public and private, but we were fully aware of the fact that Mrs. Marshall's passion for spoken Latin was completely unique. In other words, we thought the whole idea was crazy and that is probably why we liked it so much. Mrs. Marshall never won our personal love and never tried to. She won our cooperation because of her consuming interest in her subject. She really cared about the changes that had taken place in the pronunciation, thoroughly convinced that the Romans had said weni, widi, wici, even though they wrote it all with v's. We never took her ideology seriously but we learned Latin with enthusiastic diligence.

After centuries of occupying a prominent place among required subjects, Latin is now, at best, an elective subject for a few students in many schools. I do not make extravagant claims for it. The idea that it is necessary to study Latin in order to learn modern languages seems to me to be a very roundabout kind of argument. I would assume that the time would be better spent learning what you intend to learn in the first place.

Still, Latin is a striking example of the coming and going of items in the curriculum. Now there are gentle hints in the wind that disillusionment with current educational achievement and a nostalgic longing for the training in the classics that was stressed for centuries may be leading to a revived interest in Latin. What's gone today may be here tomorrow.

Space for the Junior High School

The years in which my children attended Booker T. Washington Junior High School at 107th Street and Columbus Avenue were filled with problems that beset a city, a neighborhood and a school in transition.

The building, with a maximum capacity of 1200 students, was quite new and very well equipped for diversified teaching. First class facilities provided well appointed space for such activities as orchestra, chorus, gym, cooking and many other subjects designed to attract and motivate a wide range of interests and backgrounds.

A small remnant of the white middle class student population of the district was still in attendance. In addition, the number of students had swelled enormously as a result of the large Puerto Rican influx that characterized the fifties. A once viable school had become grossly overcrowded with children pushed into all available corners, and all space intended for enrichment filled with overflowing classes.

The executive board of the Parents Association on which I served, gave first priority to the problem of overcrowding, as did many others similarly afflicted. As the student population in many areas of the city increased (almost daily) the cry for space reverberated through the hearing rooms of City Hall, and filled the Letters to the Editor Columns of the newspapers.

At first we tackled the problem in the usual way. We asked for an additional junior high school in the district. We were turned down. Next we requested that an extra floor be mounted on top of the building. Again we were turned down.

The reason for the rejection of our demands went beyond the strains on the capital budget. The problem had to be considered from the point of view of long range planning. An urban renewal plan was projected for the neighborhood which was to demolish hundreds of run-down tenement apartments and relocate only a portion of the current slum dwellers in new public housing on the same site. According to the plan, many hundreds of families were destined to move away.

The fact that this viewpoint was reasonable did not alleviate the overcrowding at Booker T. Washington. The Board of Education expected us to react as parents are supposed to, and as they used to in calmer times, and docilely accept the deterioration of our children's education in the name of future need or the lack of it.

Instead we looked about for another solution and found one that would require no structural change anywhere and no burden to any segment of the city budget.

We arranged a meeting with the principal of Commerce High School, the institution that normally received most of our graduates. We learned that since the World War II and post-war baby boom had not yet reached the high school age, there was ample room to absorb 300 or more of our ninth graders into the under populated freshman class of Commerce High School. We hoped that a selected group of older children now in the last year of our junior high school could be moved immediately to the first year of high school instead of waiting to enter in the second year as was customary.

We made an appointment with the Superintendent in charge of the Junior High School Division and nine of us, neatly dressed and wearing clean white gloves (the gloves were rumored to guarantee a favorable hearing) descended upon him fully expecting an enthusiastic endorsement of our brilliant proposal.

After expressing his dismay at the size of the delegation, he listened to our suggestion and delivered his verdict in the pontifical tones of one who knows he is absolutely right, a typically bold defender of the last word in educational philosophy.

He explained the importance of the current organization of the educational set-up. The twelve years of public schooling were divided into the sacrosanct system known as 6-3-3: six years of elementary school, three of junior high school and three of high school. The freshman class remained in the high schools only to accommodate transfer students from the eighth grade of old-fashioned private and parochial schools which came to an end after eight years.

He went on to explain that the changeover (from the former 8-4 system) was still not complete, but the psychological and pedagogical value of the three-year junior high school for children of that terribly difficult age group was so overwhelming that there could be no question of violating the basic principle for even 300 exceptions in spite of the cost that our children were paying.

The Superintendent was as immobile as he was dishonest. The truth is that the child labor law enacted in the 1920's set the school leaving age at a level that coincided in most cases with the end of the eighth grade. A ninth grade was then tacked on to the elementary school in the hope of motivating potential drop-outs to stay for one more year of schooling. This led to the formation of the 6-3-3 as the school population grew too big to be accommodated in the buildings assigned to the elementary schools. It was quite accidental and, typically, it provided the basis for an "innovation" that would enable a bureaucrat to defend his empire.

In truth, the junior high school had never been successful, but it was then in that stage of development which begins to point to ultimate failure and so often leads educators to build up a philosophy around it in order to bolster a course of action that cannot be defended in any other way.

We went back to our overcrowded school defeated and helpless, but grateful for the seemingly endless capacity of both children and teachers to cope with a situation which was as bad as it was unnecessary.

In 1962 the pressure for school improvement was so intense that another study, another solution, another “must do” was inevitable. The revolutionary result of this study hit the front page of the newspapers, complete with the plaudits of the experts in the field of education. The solution was reorganization of the city schools in terms of 4-4-4.

The junior high school was in disgrace. The Intermediate School (grades 5, 6, 7 and 8) was to take its place. The decision makers were so impressed by the miraculous properties of 4-4-4 that the changeover was mandated by the state of New York in spite of the enormity of the cost to the city.

Progress has been slow. As of 1976, some IS schools are in operation; some elementary schools terminate after the fifth grade (a year earlier than before, but a year later than the mandated fourth grade); the high schools have increased the size of the freshman class to some extent. In some cases a sixth grade is being added to the schools that were working toward setting themselves up as four-grade schools because of the decline in school population and the attempt to close some unneeded schools in the interest of saving money for the city.

The effect of the 4-4-4 will probably not ever be evaluated because basic situations always change in New York City faster than changes can be effected. By 1976 two serious factors were exerting their influence. A drop in the birth rate had lowered the number of children entering school, and the money for even normal operations had dwindled to the point that brought the viability of the entire system into question.

New York City is much too large, its population much too diverse, its needs too variable and political pressures too intense to allow for any rigid form of school organization.

P.S. 103

In the fall of 1955, armed with my Master's Degree, my training and a substitute's license, I found a steady job teaching in P.S. 103, an antiquated, broken down building at 119th street and Madison Avenue serving the poverty stricken population of the ghetto neighborhood. Like P.S. 93, where I spent my early school years, P.S. 103 has been demolished, a fate it richly deserved.

In 1955 the witch hunt for REDS was proceeding full force in the United States and it had struck a responsive chord in Charles Silver, the head of the Board of Education. Teachers were being forced to take oaths of allegiance for themselves, and to inform on each other with respect to affiliation with radical movements, present or past. It was an outrageous assault on a tradition of freedom that had distinguished the public school system of New York City ever since its inception.

My grandmother's sister had been a principal on East 100th Street in the early part of the century during the height of the Italian immigration. She herself was a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary, voted Republican in every election and believed wholeheartedly in the glories of the capitalist system. Two Italian boys in her school got into trouble with someone higher up in the system because of their open avowal of socialism and were threatened with expulsion. Aunt Milly went to bat for them and won. She simply defended free speech as an essential element in the education of an American citizen. Because I had this kind of viewpoint in my background, I could not believe that the long hand of Charles Silver would affect me in any way.

School starts in New York on a Monday, but the teachers come in on the previous Wednesday to get their class assignments, look over the roll book to learn the names of the children, set up their rooms and learn anything they need to know about the routines and procedures. I arrived expecting that I would spend the day in this way. Instead I was greeted at the door and told to go immediately into the auditorium without being given any explanation. Most of the teachers were already seated. All of them looked strained and some of them were even crying. After a short while the principal got up in the front of the auditorium. He looked terribly beaten, a very different man from the rather typical school principal I had known as a student teacher.

In very subdued tones he told us that in his younger days he had been a member of a radical group, but that he had left the movement many years earlier. He had been unwilling to lie about it and had hoped that his past record would be overlooked.

However, great pressure was put on him to name other teachers and principals who had been in the movement with him. This he refused to do. As a result he had been summarily fired, and the burden of running the school had fallen to the assistant principal.

I learned that he was trying to eke out a living as a television repair man while groups of concerned citizens went to work to restore his civil rights. It took several years and a cooling off of the political environment to achieve that goal and close a chapter in American history that should never have been opened.

The blow to the morale of the teaching staff, and to new teachers like me in particular, was staggering, but we soon learned the first, the crucial, the basic lesson - children were coming in and they had to be handled and they had to be taught. On a day-to-day basis, primary responsibility is to the children and it must be met. So I pulled myself together and went back to my room to see what I could learn about the children coming into my class after the weekend, and to do what I could to organize my plans for them.

One of my professors at Teachers College had expressed great angry dismay over the lack of tenderness that he found in women teachers. He had described a scene he had observed in a public school in which a teacher had simply ignored the bitter tears of a young child. "Women," he said, "are supposed to be tender. How could she do such a thing?"

At the time I had wondered about that myself, as quick as anyone to condemn such lack of maternal feeling. How could she? I found out how she could on the very first day of my very first job, as a teacher of first graders in P.S. 103 who had never been in school before.

Theresa was delivered into my hands by her mother and immediately decided against the whole thing--the wretched building, the strange routines and the crowded lines of children jumping, pushing, yelling and ultimately settling into some kind of order. Theresa reacted with tears and great sobs. I asked her mother to stay with her daughter until she adjusted, but she was totally undisturbed by the scene that was taking place and departed with the explanation that she had children at home and had to return at once.

In between gathering up children who were as strange to me as I was to them from all over the yard, I tried to comfort Theresa --to no avail. Whatever words came through the sobs were in Spanish and my English cajoling fell on deaf ears.

By some miracle, I got the children upstairs and into the rows of seats and desks that were screwed down to the floor confining the children to space that was

often too small for them. Theresa was not in her seat. She was on the floor of the coat closet, refusing to budge and still crying bitterly, and that is where she stayed and that is what she did for two whole days. I had a big class to take care of, and even if I had been free to deal with her, I don't think there was anything I could have done. On the third day she emerged from the closet, all smiles, eager to work and completely fluent in English. She was a happy and able student from that day on.

Even though there were as many as 35 children in one small room with one teacher, the usable space of the school was so limited that the first grade had been put on an overlapping session. This meant that my class had to vacate the room to allow the next class to come in. I found this sharing of a classroom a simply horrendous way to teach, but the other teachers had adjusted to it and had found creative solutions. As a result, late in the morning we took the children to an auditorium on the fourth floor, four of the first grade classes meeting together for a music assembly which both I and the children found very pleasant. For me it was an enormous relief to share the responsibility and for one precious hour each day to see my children behaving like all the others--the lucky ones who had experienced teachers. Well, there was one exception in my class.

Robert was taller than most, smarter than most, and naughtier than most. He was the kind of bad boy I love to teach because his needs were as intense as they were transparent, and they yielded to easy solutions. He was a motherless child whose father was trying to raise him alone with heroic devotion but a terribly stern supervision. Robert needed affection, it's true, but a little went a long way and even a busy teacher could find a few minutes to provide it.

Robert needed something else much more. He had to be different, and there was nothing anyone could do about it but accept it. It was a simple demand to meet because all that was required was to accede to it and his behavior became completely reasonable. Whenever I prepared a lesson for the class, I brought along something slightly different for him to do. He fulfilled all assignments capably, but he had to have the choice of doing something of his own.

The assemblies always opened with the color guard and the patriotic ceremony that was still unchanged from the days of my own childhood, and it was here that Robert found the different behavior par excellence. He decided to sit out the pledge of allegiance. Every day he took a book to look at during assembly and every day he sat and "read" while the children repeated the meaningless syllables designed to sound like what their teachers were saying. Robert had no particular ideology to support his action. When I asked him why he did it, he said he thought it was silly and he could get more out of looking at a book. It took a little doing for

me to persuade the other teachers that nothing terrible would happen as a result of his lack of participation. I was sure that no other child would follow his example and no one did. As a matter of fact, as time went on he stood up with everyone else. Some need of his had been satisfied. I don't think it was a need to rebel. I think it was nothing more than the need to be different.

I lasted in that job for four weeks. I was making progress and the children were slowly, very slowly, settling into a normal class. But in the end I realized that I was too inexperienced, too old, too rigid and too pregnant to survive the appalling working conditions in P.S. 103. I wanted a calmer environment in which to wait for my baby. So I did what thousands of new teachers do every year. I quit. I was sure it was right for me and for the class. My only concern was Robert who required just a little bit of understanding. I exacted a promise from the other teachers on the grade that they would keep an eye on him and see to it that he was protected from oppressive conformity. I have no doubt that the promise was kept.

The Culture Gap and How It Wasn't Handled

The Puerto Rican immigration started flooding the West Side schools sometime in the fifties and hit its peak in the sixties. It sent the inhabitants rushing like mad to the suburbs and to private schools like refugees from a natural disaster. It was a panic stricken retreat, based very often on hearsay rather than direct experience.

The abandonment of the schools of New York City by the white middle class was a tragedy which should have been averted. There was no lack of unreasonable demand that the dwindling minority of mainland white children be spread around in ever thinning proportions in order to integrate the schools, but no one ever really did anything to stem the tide of withdrawal.

In 1961 our third child was ready for kindergarten. The parents of his friends were all preoccupied with the "school problem" which usually meant the burden of finding a private school which would both meet their requirements and accept their child. In many ways it was more difficult than selecting a college.

For us there was no question, we knew we wanted our child in P.S. 165 for many reasons. In fact, we were committed to what we regarded as an educational system that was fundamentally sound.

Given this fact, plus my background in teaching, plus my previous experience as an "active parent", it was inevitable that I would be drawn into the Parents Association in some capacity or other. It was my intention to restrict my affiliation to some small but useful role and let it go at that. No one, therefore, was more surprised than I to find in 1962, that I had become president of the organization. During the terribly turbulent years of 1962 and 1963 I had to try to understand and represent all the parents of a school population that was 12% black, 18% white and 70% Puerto Rican. It was a demanding job that put me right into the center of what was happening in the city as well as in the schools.

In addition to the language barrier, the new arrivals from Puerto Rico brought customs, attitudes and child rearing practices that frequently caused clashes with the well entrenched culture.

During a parent conference, a kindergarten teacher complained to a Puerto Rican mother, "Your son is immature." The mother replied in astonishment, "of course he's immature. He's only five years old." The teacher believed that she was imparting important psychological information, but the mother came right back with information of her own. She told the teacher that her people raised their children to be immature at five and mature at thirty-five. The American men she had observed were mature at five and

immature at thirty-five. She strongly recommended that American parents and teachers learn this lesson and save their men from later inadequacy.

The Hispanic child came to school trained to show respect by addressing the teacher as “maestra” and never by her name. For some reason or other, being called “teacher” usually evoked infuriated reactions as though it represented a threat to one's identity,

The child was also taught that when spoken to by the teacher, especially when being scolded, he must glue his eyes to the floor in order to show proper humility and contrition. Although this went on all the time, nothing stopped some of the teachers from shouting, “Look at me when I talk to you.”

All kinds of parental prohibitions interfered with the goals of progressive education. No pictures in notebooks (a waste of time and paper), no soiling of clothes from painting or playground visits (activities not considered worthy of school hours), no sitting on the floor at story reading time (an immodest position for little girls). There was nothing to do about this conflict between the home and the school except to give up the treasured teaching ideas of progressive education that brought so much trouble for the children at home.

Sometime in 1962 a crisis situation developed on the upper West Side over the school lunch. Most of the children ate the “free lunch” and did not see their parents until they returned home after three, but in every school there was a small group of mothers who were determined to continue the life style that they had brought with them from Puerto Rico. They brought the children to school in the morning, congregated in the inside yard, chatting and gossiping until about ten when they went home to prepare the noon-day meal. Since the children could not come home for lunch, they and the younger siblings came to school to eat with them *en famille*. They brought the hot food they were used to in metal containers and sat down in the lunchroom.

Even though the numbers involved were small, this created storms of protest from most administrations, and on one occasion a group of irate mothers and the principal ended up in the police station, with one of the mothers accused of assault against the head of the school. Fortunately for P.S. 165, its enlightened, warm-hearted principal thought that a noontime family reunion, complete with a hot meal from home was a beautiful idea, and he simply provided a separate section of the lunchroom for their benefit. In other schools the confrontation continued for some time.

The Parents Association of P.S. 165 during the period of my presidency, held open meetings about once a month, Although we probably had the best attendance record for a school of that ethnic composition, and although we tried

very hard to prepare programs that would interest the majority of parents, the meetings were losing their audience from month to month, No matter how we planned, no matter what the announced subject of the meeting was, it usually turned out that the parents used the meeting as a forum in which to express their distress over their children's poor performance and to demand that something be done about it. The administration and teachers used the meetings to justify their approach either in terms of educational theory, which interested absolutely nobody or, worse still, in terms of the limitations imposed by the inadequate home background of the children. The subject was emotionally charged, with truth lying on all sides, and communication seemed hopeless.

As an experiment, I announced a morning meeting just for mothers (fathers almost never came anyway) offering coffee and cake and totally free discussion without an agenda and without the presence of anyone official from the school.

In my wildest dreams I could not have predicted the form that that meeting would take.

The attendance exceeded our most optimistic expectations. As in most West Side schools there was a wide assortment of national and ethnic origins, of economic class and of educational background. However, the articulate members were sharply divided between two distinct groups --the Spanish speakers of various backgrounds but similar views on child psychology, and the mainland whites, who were liberals with a heavy psychoanalytic orientation toward child rearing. In the discussion that developed, it was apparent that both groups were free of any doubt about the validity of their viewpoints.

The first speaker captured the meeting. She responded to my offer to dispense with the usual business and get right down to grievances. She spoke in Spanish, but we all had the advantage of transistors and simultaneous translation and, therefore, everyone could understand her story.

She was very, very angry. Her daughter was in the kindergarten, and since she was a very protective mother, she spent all day in the classroom with her. Two kindergarten classes shared a bathroom located between the two rooms and the children of both sexes were allowed to use it freely during the day. On one occasion she accompanied her daughter into this no man's land, and while her daughter was seated in one of the stalls, a boy from the other class climbed up the wall and peeked over the partition.

Furious at this infringement of her daughter's honor, she burst in on the teacher of the other class demanding immediate punishment of the young offender. The teacher, young, progressive and extremely gifted, patiently

explained that the boy in question had a great many emotional problems but that he was making progress. She did not want to punish him, or even to scold him since she did not want to make him feel guilty at this stage of his development.

This explanation fell on deaf ears. In search of retribution, she went storming into the assistant principal who, like the teacher, was young, progressive and extremely gifted. She, in turn, tried to calm the distraught mother with assurances that the teacher in question was competent, and worthy of support in this instance. Furious at this unperturbed attitude toward what she regarded as a sexual offense, she came to this meeting in the hope that the Parents Association would take up her case.

As soon as she had finished, it became clear that the audience was lined up like two debating teams, one side defending the honor of little girls against an aggressive male world, and the other defending the right of little boys to grow up without guilt feelings about their natural sexual curiosity. Since everybody likes to talk about sex, the discussion got livelier and livelier. The air filled with Freudian psychology in English and anxious assertions about the inevitable nature of the male in Spanish. The participants soon discovered bilingual ability that they never knew they had. Transistors set aside, the arguments raged in two languages, everyone understanding everyone else.

Of course, nothing was resolved. The Executive Board of the Parents Association agreed to bring the matter to the attention of the administration, without demanding punishment for the guilty male child. The culture gap was not bridged, but bringing it into the open like that certainly made life in that school very interesting. No opinions were changed, no great understandings were reached, but I am sure that everyone who participated remembers that meeting as the best of the year.

Puerto Rican Study

When I became President of the Parents Association of P.S. 165 on the upper West Side of Manhattan in 1962, the panacea of the moment was a program widely touted as the solution to the academic failure of vast numbers of Puerto Rican children in the city schools. This was the result of a four-year study financed by a \$400,000 grant from the Ford Foundation.

It was fairly typical of panaceas in general in that it created new positions, new bureaucrats, new salaries, new reports, and above all, new filing cabinets to take up space in overcrowded buildings.

The key word in the study and in the program was “language handicapped.” The underlying assumption was that lack of knowledge of the English language was responsible for the academic failure. This idea was basic to virtually every interpretation of the problem that was made and to every solution that was tried. It arose and persisted in spite of the fact that the New York City school system had been absorbing the foreign born for 150 years and taking pride in its graduates, native and foreign speakers alike; that most of the children had been born on the mainland of the United States, and that the most pervasive cultural influence in their lives was English language television.

To help the “language handicapped” child, three new jobs were created: the NE Coordinator (non-English speaking)¹, the AT (auxiliary teacher) and the Exchange Teacher (from Puerto Rico).

The NE Coordinator - supervisor of the program within each school. A more realistic title would have been “keeper of the files” because in too many instances, the job began and ended right there.

Her main task was to identify and list the children who might be expected to have difficulty because of unfamiliarity with the English language. In theory this should have extended to all such children. At P.S. 165 there were many who spoke a variety of languages at home. In my son's kindergarten class of 25 children six different languages were spoken by the children at home, including Greek and Maltese!

In practice, the listing of the “handicapped” children was limited to those with Spanish surnames, without further investigation and without any knowledge of the child's actual history. A child who arrived from France never made the list even though he was daily reduced to bitter tears because of his inability to understand English. On the other hand, the child whose ancestors had arrived in

¹ The NE Coordinator did not know any Spanish and never used any in connection with her duties.

New York City when Peter Stuyvesant was governor was counted among the “handicapped” because his name was Mendes or Peres.

Letters were periodically sent to the parents in accordance with this list, written in Spanish and offering some advice about adjusting to this strange new land. They were not graciously received by the parents who had no connection with either the language or the content of the letters.

It was difficult to discover what use the list had apart from the filling of filing cabinets and the sending of these letters. But it did have a use. When the reading tests were graded, the abnormal number of very low grades was considered an embarrassment for the school in particular, and for the entire system in general. Therefore, in computing the average score for the school, the NE Coordinator divided not by the number of children in the school, but by the number of children minus all those with Spanish surnames. This final figure bore no relation to the individual scores of the children who bore these names. It was nothing but a statistical trick. The parents of the failing children were given information about achievement based on a raising of the score, based on adjustment for “language handicap.”

As a result of this way of raising the achievement level figures, the actual reading grade attained by the pupils was concealed and made to look better than it really was. In spite of this maneuver, the decline in reading ability looked very bad, but not quite as drastic as it would otherwise have been.

As a public relations move it was a failure. Eventually reality caught up with the situation even though mandatory promotion put off the truth until the fifth or sixth grade. At that time, the parents were informed that because of the child's poor record in reading, (the true record in this case) he would not be promoted either to sixth grade or into the junior high school as the case might be. It was a cruel and unexpected blow since the parents had been misinformed all along, and the reaction was severe. “Why weren't we told about this in the second or third grade?” was a common agonized response. As realization of the implications of this procedure became apparent, great resentment built up and provoked demands for more intensive instruction of children in the lower grades.

I was in frequent contact with other presidents from the Parents Associations of the West Side schools, and I found disenchantment with the role of the NE Coordinator to be the rule rather than the exception. She was perceived as the source of deception and nothing else.

The Auxiliary Teacher came from outside the normal teacher ranks, without the usual academic requirements and licensing. She was a native speaker of Spanish, preferably a Puerto Rican, and served as interpreter and translator and general guide into the mysterious ways of American culture. Since her dealings were almost entirely limited to the Spanish speaking parents, I had very little knowledge of what she actually did. I was informed that she provided translations from or into Spanish as needed, but for the Parents Association this task fell to one of our own members. As far as I could tell, the Auxiliary Teacher was treated with great respect and deference by the Spanish speaking parents and given elaborate presents on appropriate occasions but her advice and guidance were resented as irrelevant to their needs.

The AT created and dominated the Spanish Mothers Club which was perceived by the Parents Association as a kind of company dominated rival to the larger organization. The issue was academic failure and militants in both the Puerto Rican and "other" groups of parents wanted it handled by an independent organization, namely one united Parents Association. From our point of view, the AT position was an impediment to what we hoped to accomplish.

The Exchange Teacher at P.S. 165 was a young, thoroughly delightful teacher on leave from her school in Puerto Rico. She taught Spanish grammar, language and literature to Hispanic children in the older grades whose knowledge of Spanish was limited to the everyday speech of their homes. She contributed a cultural dimension to the whole school. She offered to teach Spanish to the teachers at lunch time, but no one came to the classes she had prepared.

I asked many of the teachers if a knowledge of Spanish would help them to do a better job. I was told that the scientific study conducted by the Ford Foundation had determined that the children learned better if the teacher knew no Spanish at all. Hence they had been instructed never to speak Spanish to the children.

When I asked the parents how they would feel about introducing some Spanish into the classroom they also told me about the scientific study and the fact that they had been warned to reduce the influence of Spanish in their children's lives; to turn off the Spanish radio the minute the children came home from school, and to stop the weekend excursions to the Spanish movies they all enjoyed so much. English must be pushed on all fronts. They said it hurt them to follow these instructions, but they could see the wisdom of it and they were complying as much as possible.

Ten years after the publication of this study, the reading scores of Puerto Rican children had declined. Inevitably, the time for a turn-about was approaching, and as far as I know, the first place it hit was P.S. 165. A proposal was made to introduce a bilingual experiment in the kindergarten, complete with machinery and materials and profit making for the inventors of the system. The reaction of the Puerto Rican parents was immediate and intense opposition. They wanted no part of bilingual education, and I was ordered by my constituents to keep any such plan out of P.S. 165. As a result, the bilingual experiment had its beginning in a different school.

The opposition of the parents was based on their perception of the way their children were regarded and treated by the school system. They were infuriated because a program that had been forced upon them because of its scientific value was now being superseded by its opposite with equal claim to correctness. They resented the use of their children in any kind of experiment. They had full confidence in the normal curriculum and teaching methods of the Board of Education. They asked only for a more vigorous pursuit of the same teaching that was given to the mainland white pupils - something that they believed was being denied to them. They saw in innovation only profit for the innovators and a lot of false promises for themselves.

As a result of their opposition, the program was postponed for awhile in P.S. 165. The following year some of the children were invited to participate in a junior high school experiment involving the teaching of certain subjects in Spanish. The mother of one such child expressed her amazement this way. "My daughter knows my kind of Spanish. She can speak to the grocer and to children, but I don't talk geography or science to my daughter. That vocabulary she gets in school and in English. Why should she have to learn it in Spanish?" Why indeed!

Presumably nobody knew about the opinion of the Hispanic parents or else nobody cared. A new panacea had been launched and its force was bound to gain strength as the number of people with a vested interest in bilingual education increased. New offices were opened and staffed in universities and in municipal and federal government buildings; volumes of verbose research proliferated, and interest in and support for the approach grew more intense while the test results steadily declined.

In the normal course of events HEW entered the scene armed with its ability to cut funds and presumably justified by powerful protagonists in political and educational circles. On October 23, 1976, The New York Times announced that, "The Board of Education and the School Chancellor of New York City were ruled in contempt of court yesterday for having failed steadily and repeatedly to exercise

their power to expedite a bilingual education program for Spanish-speaking students.”

It was a matter of do it or else lose federal funding. The sums involved were so large that cities could not afford to sacrifice them and the search for children to fill these classes became desperate. Any child with a Spanish surname ran the risk of being transferred into a class for the “language handicapped.” One teacher reports that when she heard that a Black child who had been very successful in her class the previous year was failing in his new class, she sought him out for an explanation. With understandable bewilderment he replied, “I don't know a word of Spanish.”

By the time that Ronald Reagan took office, educators were beginning to question the value of bilingual education and starting to think about something different, referred to as “immersion in English.”

As everyone knows by now, educational panaceas come and go. All are introduced to the tune of both wild enthusiasm and violent opposition, but it is a foregone conclusion that whatever it is, it has a destined life span. The only question is how long it will take to die. With the announcement of the reduction of federal support for bilingual education by Secretary of Education Bell, a program marked by arguments, by extravagant but unsubstantiated claims, by costly experiments and dubious results should find its place in the panacea graveyard. There will be appeals against a tragic premature death, but it is unlikely that the life support systems can be maintained for very long.

The thrust will probably change, but the emotion, the political pressure, the confidence in the panacea of the moment will probably continue. It attaches itself to anything and everything that hits the ideological airwaves. What is true for the treatment of the "language handicapped" is true for dozens of other programs introduced with like fanfare and buried beneath the invective of the rising batch of innovators. Anger, demonstrations, revenge and recourse to the courts ride the crest of each new wave.

From crisis to crisis, the children and their teachers are victimized by this topsy-turvy way of handling their problems.

Integration and the Neighborhood School

In the arguments that raged all over the country in the wake of the Supreme Court decision of 1954, the one most frequently heard was that segregation was a matter of housing and could not be handled through the schools until neighborhoods changed. The Columbia University area, and the upper west side generally, were a perfect example of the flaws in that argument.

This area was integrated in every sense of the word; racially, religiously, economically. It always had been. Multilingual, multiracial, upper class and lower class, the west Side, by its diversity and its lively quality had been attracting liberal minded people whose tolerance was rewarded by comfortable spacious apartments at reasonable rentals. The neighborhood was enriched by many important educational and cultural institutions; among them, Columbia University, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and two theological seminaries. Emanating from these institutions and the scholars associated with them, were serious criticisms against those forces in the South that were resisting the wave of the future in terms of school desegregation, but the demand for white attendance at integrated schools elsewhere rarely affected the children of this neighborhood whose parents could afford to shun the local public schools, and enroll them in private schools.

First as a private citizen, and later as President of the Parents Association of P.S. 165, I tried to influence parents who were on the threshold of decision-making with respect to schooling for their young children. I and others of like mind, hoped to maintain and increase the proportion of white middle class children in the two schools of the Morningside Area, P.S. 165 on 109th street and P.S. 125 on 123rd street. At that time the white, or more accurately, non-minority, population constituted two-thirds of the total student body of New York City, the reverse of the later figures, and we realized that integration could not be achieved in the absence of white children.

We also looked (in vain) to the institutions that abounded in the area to influence their staffs and parishioners to consider public school and to use their wisdom and resources to enrich the curriculum and to make these two schools exciting places in which to educate all the children living in the area.

I never appealed to one's social conscience but rather asked for an open mind on the qualities of public schools as a basis for making the decision. I firmly believed that the education provided in these two schools was much better than was generally assumed.

The white withdrawal from the public schools of New York City was aided and abetted by a steady stream of vicious criticism, a fact which made it easier for a liberal parent to choose a private institution. Since everybody was reading the books and articles that attacked public education with so many dismal stories, true and untrue, accurate or distorted, and since the readers rarely had any firsthand knowledge, this stream of literature hastened the departure. It was my belief that I could approach parents with an objective view of the reality of the situation in terms of the pluses and minuses of both public and private schools and persuade them at least to visit, if not to try the public alternative.

There was a great deal I did not like about private schools starting with the rat race to get in. Public school required proof of age, proof of correct residence and proof of vaccination. The building fund came out of the public purse and no child was evaluated in terms of his parents' ability to contribute to it.

Admission to private school was a tense, grossly competitive business. There were even some admission interviews for children as young as two and a half years old. One anxious mother asked, in all seriousness, if I knew where she could find a puzzles tutor to prepare her child for the entrance examination. If she could make it into nursery school, admission to the first grade in the same school would be almost assured. Another mother explained why her daughter had flunked the test to a very elite school. "She detests drawing," she said, "and there's no way that school can tolerate a child who doesn't like to draw."

Of course it was reasonable for parents to give serious thought to what they wanted in a school for their children. Some rejected public school outright as inconsistent with a particular life style, family tradition, fear of the unselected population or other consideration. Others were limited by individual points of view. Among people whose backgrounds were very similar in terms of money, education and profession, goals were surprisingly different. I understood and accepted the various goals of concerned parents, but I questioned whether, in fact, the private schools of their choice were meeting them and whether the child, himself, was as happy with the choice as the parents were.

Based on my own experience and that of other student teachers, and based on conversations I had had with both parents and children, I was prepared to argue that private schools are not always what they seem. The claim of "individual attention" was a mockery for the unhappy boy I had observed who read at sixth grade level at home, but was forced to plow through one deadly second grade reader after another in sequence, simply because he was in the second grade. I knew children who were suffering from the pressure of the "high standards" schools, kept in an environment that was damaging to them because of their

parents' insistence on French in the first grade, Latin in the seventh and Plato in the tenth, along with burdensome hours of homework at every level. Changes of school were sometimes made by understanding parents, but rarely to public schools.

In spite of the much publicized failures among the city's pupils, I saw very little reason for concern about academic achievement for capable students. Ten of the children from my son's class at Booker T. Washington Junior High School became candidates for Woodrow Wilson Fellowships upon graduation from college. The public schools of New York City had become vulnerable to attack because the academic levels were declining with the changing population. The results for those children were undeniably disappointing, but I was not recommending public school for them: I was recommending it for children whose academic success was extremely likely.

The most powerful objection raised by reluctant parents was that they could not bear to expose their children to the painful existence of the poverty stricken, multi-problem families that had moved into the neighborhood. They did not want their children roughed up by the behavior that characterized many of these youngsters. They expressed sympathy for the unfortunate majority and sincerely hoped that steps would be taken to improve their lot in life, but they were afraid of sacrificing their children on the altar of social change. It was a protective attitude and completely understandable, but I had reason to believe that the situation might be viewed differently.

In the first place, children varied in their need for protection, and in the second place, they did not always see their own situation in the same light as did their worried parents. What looked like disaster to an adult could look like the norm, or even just something interesting to a child.

I realized this one warm evening in June when I had occasion to walk through 104th Street with my son who was eight years old. There were literally hundreds of people congregated in one short block. Transistor radios and guitars filled the air with Rock and Latin music. A man and a woman were having a fierce fight while other couples were engaged in the public phase of their love making. Some children were playing ball while others were fighting. A policeman was making an arrest, protested by three or four onlookers, but ignored by everyone else. I was feeling very guilty, even a little afraid, because I had exposed my son to this scene, when he looked at me, obviously delighted and said, "What a lively street!"

For the children who were strong enough to cope with the situation, and most children were, the facts did not seem so terrible, and the education in the

realities of life learned at an early age was well worth the price. I thought so at the time and what I have seen of the maturing of the protected and the unprotected makes me believe that in many instances I was right. It was simply not possible to insulate children from the changes taking place in the world they would inherit. Young people do not like to be on the outside looking in. The mainstream may be muddy and filled with dangerous flora and fauna, but that is where they want to be.

Whatever the rationale for the choice of private school may have been, for a great many parents the conflict between what they did for their children and the idealism of what they believed the government should do to white children in other situations was a serious one. They actively supported vigorous government action to implement the Supreme Court decision in the face of intense opposition from white parents, particularly in the South. Living in an integrated neighborhood, in many cases working toward integration in their professional pursuits, they had to come to terms with themselves. They could not conceive of themselves as racist.

The term "middle class" was gradually substituted for "white." It felt better to reject integration, not because the children were black, but because they were poor. Euphemisms were newly created each year to take the sting of money out of the discussion. "Disadvantaged," "culturally deprived," etc. provided the terminology for avoiding the gap between the haves and the have-nots. "Middle class," a term that had been pejorative in my youth, denoting materialism and stuffiness, was worn like a badge of achievement.

One day as I was walking down the street I overheard a conversation between two young women who were pushing baby carriages. One of them was discussing the nursery school that her older child attended. "The teacher is so clever," she said. "She had the children bring cereal boxes from home and they learned to read the names that were printed on them." "Amazing," said the other. "Could the children really do that?" She assured her friend that the reading lesson had been successful. "These middle class kids can do anything!" she explained.

It really wasn't much of a feat for a four-year old to read Corn Flakes on a familiar cereal box, and a poor child could certainly have done it, but the mythology, amply supported by the ever-new euphemisms to describe the poor, had done its job of feeding the prejudice of people who emotionally and even professionally could not afford to have any.

The middle class flight continued, to the suburbs or to private schools, and with these young families went the resources that they and their institutions could have contributed to the local schools of New York City.

Adjacent to the house in which I now live there is an empty lot where once stood the humble building in which I spent my childhood. In those days the early

morning saw the streets filling with children walking to school, not just some of the children, but virtually all the children who lived in the area. The girl whose mother had her own car and chauffeur and the girl who spent her weekends on the family yacht, the children of the janitors and the storekeepers, the Puerto Rican immigrant who lived on my block, the daughter of Irish immigrants struggling to make a living who became valedictorian, black and white, rich and poor, all greeting each other as the stream of young citizens made its way to P.S. 93.

Now in the morning, the streets are filled with the children of my neighbors. Some of them walk across the street to the public school, and some are whisked out of the neighborhood in an assortment of vehicles to private schools all over the city. 8:30 in the morning, once the symbol of the unifying of a neighborhood and a city, is now notable as the parting of the ways.

There are still some parents who are loyal to the public schools and choose to send their children across the street. In spite of everything that has happened their children remain in city schools, learning and developing as students and as human beings. Given half a chance there is still some small hope that the trend away from the integrated neighborhood school may be reversed.

Substitute in Spanish Harlem

In the spring of 1964 we moved out of the school district, my son was transferred out of P.S. 165, and I was automatically transferred out of that Parents Association. Freed from the heavy duties that had absorbed all of my time for two years, I was ready to respond to the angry refrain I had heard so often from exasperated teachers “You try doing this job.” I was very tempted to do just that, but I decided to start off slowly. I renewed my substitute's license, determined to stop criticizing and start doing the job I believed I could do.

As a per diem substitute I was not appointed to any specific school by the Board of Education, but was free to shop around for a school in which to work. I made telephone calls, answered ads and visited schools until I found what I wanted on the East Side in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood, in a school that housed some of the poorest children in the city.

The principal was an elderly lady, close to retirement, who viewed her school as a teacher training institution, and expected her staff to look to the administration for guidance in the continued improvement of their skills.

Thanks to the principal's supervision of my assignments, I completed the first two days in a state of euphoria. She had started me off with carefully selected “good” classes. I breezed through those two productive days with classes that had never seen me before, enjoying my work, learning a great deal and rejoicing in my happy relationship with the delightful children. That was the beginning. I should have known that it couldn't last.

On the third day, I was plunged, without any warning, into the more harrowing realities of that school. At the end of the day, the principal stopped me in the hall with a funny little smile on her face and asked, “Well, how was it?” I replied, “I have had my trial by fire.” I confided to her my shock at what I had encountered and my distress at what I felt was a dismal failure that augured no good for the future. With humor and patience she restored my professional sense of proportion. She assured me that I was ready for that kind of assignment and successfully encouraged me to keep trying.

The class which had given me such a rude introduction to the “rough” situations was a sixth grade, selected for its poor level of achievement and for the obstreperous behavior which so often accompanies a lack of success. I know that the truth is that in the months and years that followed, my heart sank every time I walked into the office in the morning and was handed the keys to that room. I used to stand up front, helpless against a continuous barrage of board erasers and broken

crayons. I spent a lot of time trying to break up fights between boys who towered above me.

One day I decided to work out a long list of very specific, interesting assignments for the afternoon. I spent my lunch hour writing the program out on every blackboard in the room fully confident that if the children saw the assignments laid out for them in this way, there was a good chance that they would get to work. I never found out if it was a good idea or not. By the time the last child entered the room, the blackboards were entirely blank.

There's nothing like a day of teaching recollected in tranquility. Away from the class, the school, the neighborhood, it is so easy to forget the bedlam and frustration and cling to the memory of the moments that transcend anything that might happen in an easier situation. That sixth grade class was like that. There were lessons, even whole days that went remarkably well, days that the children thanked me for and vowed to remember always.

I have forgotten the girls completely, but the boys are still remembered with genuine warmth. There was something about those terrible kids that I really liked. Their problems, their vulnerability and their unsuspected tenderness put me in touch with some of the most poignant experiences of my school life.

When I first came to the school, I received a very good piece of advice from the assistant principal, who warned me, "Bring pencils." An investment in a supply of pencils provided me with a very handy defense against the eternal excuse for not working, "Teacher, I ain't got no pencil." To me it seemed like a small expense and I came to school well supplied. I did not realize how this expenditure of mine was viewed by the children until something happened at the end of a particularly bad day with that same sixth grade class. Just as I was putting my coat on, thoroughly discouraged and thoroughly disenchanted with children in general, a big boy, one of those who had made ample trouble all day long, came to me with a bunch of my pencils. "You've been nice to us," he said, "and I don't want you to lose your pencils." He had gone around the room and none too gently, had collected my property from everyone who had it.

The hardest thing to cope with in any classroom, I think, is the fights. This school had a majority of Puerto Rican children who did not always get along with the smaller group of black children. Coming from a different culture, casual comments were sometimes taken as insults, and fists started to fly, with angry shouts filling the air. The class loved a fight, whatever the cause, and added to the hubbub with enthusiastic spectatorism.

I learned to cope with most of them and to get used to them, but one day a very disturbed boy in that sixth grade class suddenly attacked another boy with

such viciousness, and such complete lack of control, that I realized that I was up against the situation that often faces teachers, a situation that calls for psychiatric training, but that must be handled by the teacher as the only adult present. This boy was crying hysterically as he hurled his hands and feet at his victim whose attempts to defend himself and fight back simply added fuel to the fire. Both boys were much taller and heavier than I and I knew that I was not physically able to pry them loose from each other and worse still, there was not even time to get help from outside.

The terrible quality of the fight had stunned the entire class into unaccustomed silence, and there was not a single sound in that room apart from that of the dramatic conflict that was taking place. As I was helplessly trying to think of something I could do, Gregory, a tall, powerfully-built black boy at the back of the room, rose from his seat and approached the hysterical child. In a very quiet, soothing voice, he kept repeating, "It's all right. You're going to be all right. It's O.K." He never touched him at all. He just kept repeating his quiet assurances over and over again, always using the same words and the same tone of voice, until the poor child released his grip and sank back into his seat crying bitterly.

He wasn't the only one with tears in his eyes. During the whole episode I had stood at the front of the room with tears dripping down my cheeks, overwhelmed by the gentleness and the intelligence of a bad boy in the bottom sixth grade.

Substitute in Black Harlem

As time went on, I decided to shop around for another school in which to substitute. I found it in west Harlem, a modern well-kept building facing a beautiful park, and blessed with a seven minute door-to-door traveling time. The area and the children in it were all black, and the staff was integrated.

I did not need the feature stories which appeared from time to time in newspapers to tell me how awful the neighborhood really was. I was assailed by the truth as soon as the bus brought me close to my stop.

I always left the school at lunch time and walked a few blocks to my favorite restaurant, and I soon became accustomed to a scene of deteriorated housing, garbage strewn streets, debris-covered empty lots and a population mix of the healthy and the young with the old, the drunk, the addicted, the lame and the ragged; the groups of the idle and the groups of children in huge numbers.

The scene rarely changed, so my first experience with pusher day came as a shock. At first I did not know what to make of the unaccustomed hubbub on the streets. Hundreds of people, most of them young men, jammed every block and the air was electric with a sense of anxiety and expectation. Luxurious limousines, custom made in shades of purple and other exotic colors, most with New Jersey license plates, kept pulling up to the corners and stopping for a short time. It was clearly different from the everyday street scene.

I sat down at the lunch counter next to an old man, a long-time resident of the area, who looked at me with a disapproving stare and finally spoke to me. "You should not have come out today," he said. "This is the day of the week when the big-time pushers come and they're all out there waiting for their connections. They need a lot of money, so be careful." I thanked him for his advice and after we had talked for awhile about the sorrows of a neighborhood and a people being destroyed by drugs, I walked back to school as quickly as possible, without looking up or down or sideways. The most painful aspect of working in Harlem was the influence of drugs. One day I came upon a sign written in chalk on the wall of a building. It said, "What slavery could not do to you, drugs are doing to you." I knew it was true and I hoped that the message would influence at least some of those who read it.

A traditional approach to the field of child guidance does not prepare any teacher for the distortions created by the exigencies of the drug trade. I had to get used to the boasting of a ten-year old pusher who quoted to me the extravagant cost of every article of clothing he was wearing. "My shoes cost \$50, my sport jacket \$75" and so on. He was making a fortune in a grown-up business. Is it any wonder

he never did any work, never learned anything in school, and interfered with the learning of other children?

I tried to avoid pusher day after that. I never really was afraid to go out then or on any other day, but I couldn't stand the sight of those desperate young people, and the scene gave me an awful sense of a city totally out of control.

I knew, of course, that I was teaching in a "bad neighborhood." The evidence was all around me, and so it seemed strange, even to me, that I actually liked it. Very few teachers went out to lunch, and I think I was almost the only one who went out alone. I carried a pocketbook on principle. I felt that I must not be afraid of the place where the children spent their lives. Since nothing dangerous ever happened to me in that neighborhood, not even once, I had no reason to develop any fear of it.

On the contrary, I enjoyed those noon-time strolls. I liked the absence of tall buildings, the wide streets, the small mama and papa stores. Above all, I loved the friendly attitude of the people. Older residents would greet me from the stoops of the building, "Good morning. How are you this morning?" Or "it's a nice day, isn't it?" I think they recognized that I was a teacher even though they did not know me, and they took the opportunity to show me the respect that they accorded to the profession.

In the turn-of-the-century, one-time ice cream parlor where I ate my lunch, I always received a warm welcome from the waitresses, whose small town friendliness reflected the time when the art deco engraving on the restaurant mirrors were first installed. Before I even gave my order, I was greeted with, "The children are lucky today, I see." I was not always sure that they were right by any means, but the encouragement they offered always sent me back to my class happy and relaxed, and determined to make it true until three o'clock.

I liked working there so much that I almost never went anywhere else. For the most part I came in just a few times a month, each time assigned to a different class, beginning in the morning and ending at three that afternoon. Despite the brevity of the contact with the children, the work rarely seemed unimportant to me. Being a substitute is a special kind of teaching job. The expectations are limited, but if you meet them, the job has its own kind of satisfaction. On the whole, I liked the one day assignments and rarely kept a class for any length of time.

On one occasion I agreed to teach a kindergarten class for a period of six weeks while the regular teacher suffered through a long illness. That job had every advantage imaginable. I had a small class, a sunny, well equipped room in which to teach them, and an attached spacious yard for outside play. My professional performance was virtually guaranteed by the assistance of a paraprofessional who

was expert at handling the children and very knowledgeable about teaching. She was an intelligent, warm hearted, neighborhood woman who did much more than just assist me. Finally, since I took over the job in the spring, the children had already been trained by their own superior teacher. It was a joy from beginning to end.

One of the boys in that kindergarten class presented a challenging problem. Christopher was in many respects like the other children in the class, a little bigger, perhaps, a little more likely to fight, a little less likely to accomplish his tasks, and totally different in one respect. He never said a word, not to me, not to his own teacher, not to the classroom assistant, not even to any of his classmates. During the entire year, he said not one single word to anyone. Although he never spoke, communication with him was surprisingly normal. He reacted to everything that was said to him, and he made himself understood with no particular difficulty.

I had one ambition for that class. I hoped that when the teacher returned she would find that every child could write his name, and a good deal of my time was spent on this project. Ultimately every child did learn to do it, and most of them learned to read, or even to write, the names of other children as well.

Christopher learned to read his name but he was unwilling to write it. I encouraged him to try for the first five letters, but nothing helped. One morning I came to the room early, tacked a piece of newsprint to the easel and with black crayon I wrote CHRISTOPHER in huge letters on it and placed the whole thing in a conspicuous spot. When he saw his name “in lights” like that he was very excited and pleased. No more urging, no more games, no more individual instruction was required. Christopher was launched. I suggested that he start with just CHRIS, but once sold, Christopher went the whole hog.

The Easter vacation brought an end to my assignment, a fact which enabled me to leave in the blaze of glory known as the Easter party. For at least a week in advance, the classroom activities were geared to the big event, with children weaving baskets, dyeing eggs and making plans.

The hard boiled eggs arrived from home with the names of the children clearly written on them. It was their intention, and particularly their mothers' intention, that the identical eggs should come home to roost. I don't know why I expected eggs to come in as blank as the day they had been laid, but I did. I was surprised by that degree of possessiveness about eggs and I didn't like it, but I soon learned that the same story was repeated in every kindergarten class. That was the system and I took it into my head to buck it. Instead of carefully guarding the ownership of each and every egg, I persuaded the children to put their eggs into a common pile to be dyed and then to be distributed at random.

Perhaps it was foolish to go out on a limb like that at the end of a successful assignment, and make a big fuss about something that everyone else considered an understandable and essentially trivial problem. However, I decided to make the Easter party a lesson in sharing. In the upper grades I had seen too much of “this is mine” and too little of “this is ours” and I hoped that I could help these children enter the first grade with some kind of class feeling.

In addition to the goodies that I provided, I asked the children to bring, if they could, some small refreshment to be put into a common pool and shared with the whole class. In the end, almost all the children and their mothers accepted all the conditions I had set up, and we all parted good friends.

The one exception was Christopher. He went along with the eggs, but the three candy bars he brought from home stayed in his clenched fist right to the end of the party. Before he went home I spoke to him about it, urging him, finally, to taste the joy of doing his part for a shared experience like all the other children. All I got was a friendly attitude and a firm shake of the head, “No.” At last I said to him, “You know, I shared something with you.” He looked at me in wonderment, clearly eager to know what that might have been. “My knowledge of how to write your name,” I said. Then, more for myself than for him, I added, “That's what a teacher does. She shares her knowledge with the children. That's all there is to it.” Still holding his candy bars, Christopher put on his sweater and moved to the doorway where the children were waiting to be picked up. Christopher always went home alone, and as he moved out the door I saw him handing out pieces of candy and smiling to himself.

At the end of the day I packed away the remnants of the party, and closed the door on my last long term assignment.

Black Heritage

A per diem substitute has to take whatever class is offered, without any choice and without any previous warning. It could be anything, and the time to find out just what it is, is just five minutes before leading the children of the class up to their room. For the first few years I carried a survival kit filled with emergency materials, but after awhile I learned to rely on the teacher's plan book, assuming I was lucky enough to find one, or on workbooks and hints that I found around the room.

A relatively new position in the school was that of the Black Heritage teacher, a specialist who did not have a class of her own. The classes came to her room on a regular schedule throughout the week. It was rare for me to be assigned to that room and that subject, and I was happy to be relieved of the responsibility. It was a particularly sensitive post for a white teacher in an all-black school, especially one like me whose knowledge of the subject was unhappily very scanty. However, on two occasions I was the only one available.

When I first received that assignment in the morning, I was pleased to note that my first period was a free one, giving me a chance to look over the room where I would be receiving the children. The teacher had taken the plan book home with her, so there was no help there. Forty-five minutes can go by awfully quickly and the children were due any minute, and I still had no idea what I was going to do with them, when I noticed an assembly schedule on the wall indicating that the Black Heritage classes were scheduled for dramatic performances. I was delighted at this solution. Children, I said to myself, love to put on plays. What a happy delusion that was:

As soon as I had greeted children and settled them into their seats, I told them to take out their scripts and we would rehearse the play. Soon we were all set for a portrayal of life before the Civil War. Two slaves positioned themselves in the center of the room and proceeded to read the dialogue that sounded something like this:

First Slave: I can't stand this another minute. I'm going to run away.

Second Slave: Are you really going to run away?

First Slave: Yes I am.

Second Slave: Have you any money? You will need some money.

First Slave: Yes I have some money.

This entire dramatic introduction to the problems of slavery was delivered in an expressionless monotone. I could see that it was the intention of these two slaves to get this play over with as quickly as possible, a goal that would leave me at a loss for something to do.

In my innocence I thought the class would be enchanted with some dramatic instruction complete with background on the tragic situation of slavery and the heroism of those who escaped from it.

But this class wasn't buying any instruction of any kind. They chose, instead, to revert to the wild behavior which so often confronts the poor substitute. All discipline was lost forever. The classes that followed were no better. I failed to recoup from my ignominious defeat all day long.

I was very disappointed that my efforts as drama coach had failed so abysmally, but I still have to chuckle when I think of those two children racing through a dramatization of their tragic-heroic past. I never saw the final performance, but knowing their teacher, I am sure that it was both competent and meaningful. What happened that day in my class is no reflection on the play in question any more than it is a reflection on the course of Black Heritage. It says nothing about the content or the purpose, but it says a great deal about the nature of those children - that like anyone else their age, they were reacting simply as children. As soon as they saw that the teacher who normally keeps them busy working for a period of serious study was absent, they were out to take advantage of the substitute and the need to kick up their heels transcended their need to learn about their past and their identity at that moment. Black Heritage interested them as it might be expected to, but it couldn't compete with raising hell when the opportunity presented itself.

The next time they handed me Black Heritage I was careful to take no chances. I suggested that we distribute the textbooks that I found in the room and read whatever chapter they were up to. Children usually enjoy reading aloud in turn, and we got through a recital of the history and nature of the underground railway without incident. The reading came to an end, there was still half a period to go and I had to make a lesson of it on the spot. I decided not to try.

I told them frankly that I was not black (It's amazing how often they don't notice) and that I regretted that I knew so little about a subject I considered very important. I told them that the world remembered the way slaves escaped through the underground railway, and in other times and other places, other oppressed people followed their example, and learned from the experience of slaves seeking freedom from their intolerable situation.

I said to them, "I am not black, but Jewish, and six million of my people were murdered by the Nazis during World War II. Some of them escaped if they had the necessary courage and wisdom and opportunity. The chapter you just read reminds me of what happened to my friend Johanna who is a Dutch woman now living in Israel."

I saw that they were interested as I told them about Johanna's flight from Holland to Switzerland soon after the Nazis conquered the country her family had lived in peacefully for 800 years. She was sixteen at the time and is still haunted by the memory of her parents standing in the doorway, saying goodbye to her for the last time. Two weeks later they were both dead.

Johanna left with two boys, the one who later became her husband and his brother. The three of them fled into Switzerland, walking all the way and in constant danger of being detected by the Nazis. The events of that trip paralleled the incidents in the textbook to a remarkable extent. They were traveling alone, but they could not help but be dependent on other people along the way. Whenever they came to a new town at night, there was always someone who was kind, someone who would approach them and without any introduction simply say, "There is a bath and a warm supper waiting for you in my house." These good people risked their lives to help them and asked nothing in return.

They reached the last stage of the journey, the railroad station where they could find safety on a train into Switzerland, but the Nazis were pursuing them, and just as they stepped on board, one of the boys was shot. It was the brother of the man she later married. If he had lived, he would have become her brother-in-law. Instead, he was murdered at the age of eighteen, with one foot on the ladder leading to freedom.

Step by step, the story of Johanna recalled the saga of the runaway slaves. The story spoke for itself and ended just as the bell rang.

Through the Eyes of the Substitute

I have often been asked why I never became a permanent teacher with a class of my own and the satisfactions that come from seeing something come to fruition. I always answered evasively in terms of the freedom, the lack of responsibility, and the joys of not being tied down. But the truth was that I chose to maintain a relatively superficial relationship with children whose manifold troubles touched me so deeply.

At Teachers College much emphasis was placed on understanding the children, on learning about psychology and how it might affect the learning process. We were shown documentary films in which the father of the family was a henpecked husband, prevented from climbing up the executive ladder because of the influence of a domineering mother and a martyr-like wife; we learned about the boy who developed learning blocks because of the terribly high standards and impossible demands of an ambitious father. We learned about the source of trouble and very little about what to do about it. We never learned the most terrifying lesson of all – “Don't Open the Window From the Bottom.”

That was something I learned forcefully on the day that I grabbed Lucy as within seconds and without any warning, she attempted to hurl herself out and down four stories to the ground. Lucy would tell me nothing except “I don't want to live anymore” as she stood trembling and sobbing in my arms. I didn't know what had caused this tragedy and had no insight into the depths of emotion trapped inside of a child I had known and liked for some time. I had always been moved by her fragile beauty and by the overt demonstrative affection that was her means of gaining my attention. I thought of her only as a sweet, pretty child who occasionally crossed my path. I later learned that her suicidal attempt was brought on by her inability to cope with the fact that a beloved older brother had been sent off to jail that morning. Her brother was the only anchor in her life and she could not bear to handle her difficult life without the comfort of his presence.

Incidents of that kind, tragic and dramatic, are not unusual in the schools of this city. Education courses cannot prepare you for certain kinds of reality. It's one thing to answer test questions dealing with the psychology of children, it's something altogether different to find yourself teaching arithmetic one minute and seconds later coming face to face with ghastly human suffering.

I had to accept the truth not only about the unfortunate child, but also about myself. I knew that I could not live, day in and day out, with that kind of agony. I was not willing to expose myself to the overwhelming tragedy of children that I would have to see and relate to every day of the school year. I had enormous

admiration for the young people coming into the profession, surviving the shock of contact with misery, steeling themselves to withstand it and pursuing the art of teaching as the greatest gift they could possibly give the children. In a way, I envied them, but I could not help my feelings.

I determined then to remain a substitute, to do the best job I could possibly do to give the children a decent day when their own teacher was absent, but I knew that the permanent job took someone who was made of sterner stuff.

As a substitute I came into contact with the whole spectrum of the human condition in the slums, and I soon discovered that it was impossible to judge what I saw and heard. So many things were not what they seemed to be. Over the years, as I watched children develop, I realized that the shape of their lives could be very different from what I would have predicted.

Many educators believe that there is something revealing about the third grade. At the age of eight, self-awareness has finally hit the children in way that they cannot ignore. Age has forced them into a hard look at the realities of their lives, pushing some into an optimistic and ambitious path, others into pessimism and early defeat, and still others into angry, usually futile rebellion.

I was keenly alert to this fact about the third grade, and it was my experience that they usually had a bad case of “give the substitute a hard time.” One day I had my hands full with a class in which almost every seat held a “bad” child out to make me as miserable as possible. They were all hard to handle, but Rosa's behavior was totally beyond my control. I could not remember meeting a child quite like her. Something that I could not put my finger on was different about her. She could speak some English, but she invariably moved into a torrent of Spanish before she finished any sentence. Her shabby clothes and unkempt appearance went along with a kind of behavior that seemed utterly wild, untamed rather than naughty. Rosa baffled me and aroused my curiosity, so during lunch time I sought her out in the yard, and she seemed happy to spend time with me. Just to start a conversation I asked her how many brothers and sisters she had. She replied, “I don't know.” I was sure she had normal intelligence but the answer didn't make sense, and I asked her how it happened that she did not know. She said that her family lived in Puerto Rico and she had not seen them in some time. She was the only one who had come to New York. This clearly called for further explanation so I asked her, “With whom do you live?” She said, “I don't know. I think it's a friend of my mother's. No, I think she's my grandmother. That's it my grandmother. My father lives somewhere -I think it's in the Bronx.”

I took Rosa's conversation to a friend who was knowledgeable about the life of the children I was teaching and asked what she made of it. She told me that it

sometimes happens that very poor families get rid of some of their excess children by sending them to New York to be housed with a welfare client looking for another “dependent” in order to increase her payments. In many cases the children were neglected by the caretakers who had no sentiments other than their own avarice.

I met Rosa again in the fifth grade, a pretty, neatly dressed little girl, pleasantly behaved and competent in her school work. As someone who came in and out of the school, I never filled in the details. Was it her grandmother who shaped this child into what she had become? Was it a woman (one of many women I have met) who was motivated by love and a sense of responsibility to unfortunate children, and not to money from the Welfare Department?

I don't know the answer to my many questions, but my experience with Rosa helped me to learn that there is more than one side to the horrendous stories that pour into the ears of a sheltered New Yorker trying to make a living in the strange neighborhoods of the city where life is so full of human drama.

Final Reflections

The recent history of the New York City Public School System looks like one big question mark. Were the schools better in the first half of the century than in the second half? What are the sources of academic failure, how extensive is it, where is it going? How many times can the system recover from battered schools syndrome -from the strikes and the boycotts - from the innovations that fail and the innovations that are never given enough time to prove themselves; from the corruption in places high and low; from politically motivated mandates and from the absorption of waves of immigration?

Finally, the system is faced with the crushing burden of financial cutbacks and the fiscal problems of the city itself. The loss of personnel and of vital funds, coupled with a decline in public confidence turns an always shaky future into a possible, but still undefined disaster. A once proud system must now weather the storm and prove its inherent worth. Perhaps it will.

Whenever I think about the public schools of New York City and wonder about their chance for survival, my mind invariably turns to the children whom it serves and the indomitable spirit that so often rises above the disappointments and crises that plague their lives. As might be expected, many of these youngsters are defeated by the painful circumstances of their daily encounters and simply give up, often at an early age. But a great many other seem to find life a challenge to their wits and face up to it with good humor and a dare devil kind of courage that never failed to astonish me.

For year I have watched (sometimes on the sidelines, and sometimes in the middle) the city schools come through terrible trials with a strength that seemed impossible to me. At times, I believe I have seen a spirit that transcends the normal limits of endurance, and finds the bold direction that sometimes derives from the struggle for survival. I believe this spirit is something shared by the children and the institution which attempts to serve them and as I look back over the years, I remember a startling incident that I came upon quite by accident in the early 1960's.

I was walking along on the East Side, returning from my lunch hour to the school where I was working as a substitute for the day. I got as far as 100th street and stopped dead in my tracks, terrified by the sight of something that was going to happen and that I could not prevent. At 100th street, Lexington Avenue drops in cliff-like fashion to 104th Street. It was at this point that a confident young boy of perhaps eleven or twelve walked straight into the middle of this street pushing a supermarket shopping cart ahead of him. As soon as he reached the center lane, he

set up his cart so that it was facing uptown, toward the bottom of the hill. Satisfied with these preparations, he climbed into the cart, gave himself and it a little jerk and started moving. Even if I could have shouted, even if he had been willing to heed my anxious warning, once started on its path, there was nothing that could have stopped it.

As a vehicle for negotiating one of the steepest hills in the city, that wagon was remarkably ill equipped no steering wheel to guide it, no horn to herald its approach and no brake to govern its speed. As he whizzed past me I saw the ecstatic expression of a young man pitting his strength and his wits against terrifying odds. He reached the bottom safely and climbed out of the cart. Before proceeding on his way with his cart from the supermarket, he glanced up at the hill he had just descended, and the look on his face said, "I did it again." In a minute he and his cart had disappeared from view.

Goodbye and good luck!