

New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

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A Note From the Editors

Sha-Boom! Sha-Doom!

There's something in the air. It has become fashionable to call it *restructuring*. In New York City, Chancellor Fernandez has taught us to speak of it in short-hand: six initials standing for Site-Based Management (SBM = Sha-Boom!) and Shared Decision-Making (SDM = Sha-Doom!). Some might question the seriousness or the integrity of this newest chapter of the reform movement, but few would deny that the time is right for working to bring about radical, structural changes in public schools. It's up to us to make the rhetoric about change real.

For a dozen years now, consultants in the New York City Writing Project have heard teachers say, "That's great, but how can I do that in a forty-seven minute period?" or "... with 150 students?" or "But what about when they go back to their other classes?" Now is the time for teacher-consultants to answer, "You're right. You can't really do this work within the present system of your school. What are people in your school doing to change it, and how might you get involved in that work?" What if people left our courses committed not only to changing their classrooms, but also their schools?

Not that we are naive about the effectiveness of the SBM/SDM teams or the movements for change of which these are a part. Many teachers aren't even sure why they are being asked to change; others know why there must be structural changes, but have little experience in effecting such reforms. Writing Project teachers base their teaching on sound, visionary

pedagogy--the kind that eventually bumps up against traditional structures. But how much do we know about restructuring the schools where we work? Where does what we know about teaching and learning fit within the reform movements?

In this issue, we begin to address questions such as these. We start off with Candy Systra's report of what some of the questions and issues (and dreams) are for a group of people who are trying to create a new school. This is followed by Suzanne Valenza's description of an exciting unit that she taught with three other teachers at University Heights HS this last semester when her "team of teachers" were experimenting with a new, all-day program for students. Next is Maria Giacone's article about a program of change that she and her colleagues developed for English and Spanish speaking students at Brandeis HS. Finally, we have Ed Osterman's article in which he captures the voices of the Newtown HS students with whom he and his colleagues worked in an award-winning, inter-disciplinary program called the Language and Learning Core.

Our regular features continue the theme of change with two reviews of a new book on staff development, *Walking Trees*; several *Steals*, focused on how multi-cultural materials and curriculum change classrooms; *Connections*, a new column about progressive movements in education; and a sampling of April Krassner's poetry.

We welcome you to this issue where we begin to read what's in the air, and to consider as a Writing Project what the movements for change mean to us.

School Dreams

Candy Systra taught at Bronx Regional HS, an alternative high school in the Bronx, for several years until she left to join another team of dreamers and shakers. Here she's written about starting up a new site of a program that blends alternative high school students and some special education students in a single mainstream environment.

Any psychologist would call them anxiety dreams. My brother calls them my school dreams. They signal that school is about to begin and usually occur around Labor Day--but this is April!

I wake up remembering a lot of this morning's dream. In it, I'm wondering what to teach a group of students I don't really know. The dream, in living color, features long corridors, interactive museums, dolphins having to push holes through obstructions while climbing ladders, categorizing and subsequent scribbling on a yellow legal pad, and ultimately a group

Inside

Creating Communities	4
Project BESTWAY	5
A CORE Experience	7
Walking Trees	11
Connections	12
Teachers as Writers	14
Steals	16
Project Notes	17

Please see *Dreams*, next page . . .

Dreams . . . *continued from previous page*

of people who find themselves together talking about streetcorner society, leadership styles, hanging out under the Williamsburg Savings Bank Building, about crime, violence, poverty, the usual. . . . But I'm taking notes furiously, wondering if I'm going to have room on the pad, wondering how long this unit is going to take, how much time we'll have in class to do it, how the students will react, and what input they'll need to make it interesting to them.

I think the dream ended when the lecture did and the people moved up the corridor. I do remember a "What do I do Monday?" feeling in the pit of my stomach. Then I woke up.

There's something I like about having anxiety dreams. It's not the dreams themselves, but what they signify: beginnings, concerns, decisions, taking absolutely nothing for granted. It's the thrill when beliefs and experiences are thrown into new configurations.

The current set of new beginnings occurred when, at the end of January, I got a spectacular offer. The Superintendent of Alternative High Schools offered a colleague of mine a semester to plan a new school, to develop a small site for a growing program.

Project BLEND (Building Learning Experiences in New Directions) blends alternative high school students and some special education students in a single mainstream environment. This extends the belief in heterogeneity in the classroom beyond gender, ethnicity, and the typical ability tracking to include other educational and emotional strands. Originally, I'd thought it

would be easy to tell the students apart, that they'd be blended in name only, but with the thoughtful matching of students that has already occurred, it's virtually impossible to distinguish them. Currently there are three such sites in operation. Bob Blumert, my colleague, asked if I'd like to be the other person on his team to help plan and start the new program.

Each site gets a start-up team of two people, with the idea that the program will open with three or four teachers and about sixty students. The plan is for the program to expand each year until a full complement of perhaps eight or nine teachers will work with about 125 students, which reflects the "small is good" philosophy. After many years of teaching and implementing change in my own classroom, this was the opportunity to create an entire program.

We all know some things we'd change if we could. We all do make changes from term to term, or week to week in our classrooms. We all take assignments and tailor them to ourselves,

and then try for an even better fit. We at the Writing Project celebrate finding ways to make requirements fit our own histories, our interests, our constraints. Here was a chance to help design a system, to

We at the Writing Project celebrate finding ways to make requirements fit our own histories, our interests, our constraints. Here was a chance to help design a system, to create the prompts.

create the prompts. I took the job and then those school dreams started.

In many ways it is comforting to see the difference between a classroom and a program simply as one of scale. The same processes and beliefs about learning pertain, and it's far easier to start new than to try to change pre-existing situations. (Those dream dolphins may have to swim upstream, but they won't have

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Articles, Letters, Inquiries

We want you to write for the newsletter.
We are always interested in responses, ideas, new voices,
articles, poems, questions.

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to hurt their noses on so many obstructions!) It's just that when planning an entire program there are different variables to consider, I assured myself. All it requires is a mammoth ability to tolerate ambiguity. That's partly true.

Instead of the classroom issues I was more familiar with evaluating, now I'll wonder about other things. How does student selection relate to teacher selection? How much input should each have in the selection of the other? How do these decisions relate to length of classes or class size?

Or number of teacher preparations? I'd be able to find out about all the things I'd never had to and had never wanted to be part of. What about budgets? What about staff development? (I love the idea of it, dislike the term itself, but now I'd have to worry about where

to get funding for it.) What about T.O.'s, and SIE VII's, and hiring halls? What about master schedules? Chancellor's regulations and implementation of new directives?

Finding staff? How do you think about organizing a new situation, combining students in a way that hasn't been done before? All our role models are only analogous, approximate, similar..

How do you design a school in a vacuum and yet not in a vacuum? There are a few things we know for sure. We don't want to provide a situation that is a miniature comprehensive high school. We hope the staff will help select one another because they'll be working closely together. In this way, each site will develop its own personal school culture. The staff will have input regarding course offerings and scheduling because we're preparing students for a regular diploma with all 40 credits in the required areas being provided. While we hope that all the sites will share some common philosophy, we hope each one reflects the particular possibilities of its location. One located in a business district might have an external learning or community service component; one located in an arts area might build connections to museums, theaters, working artists.

At times it's particularly clear that the difference between struggling for change in one's own class and trying to make change on a programmatic level are luxuriously qualitative. Bob and I, for example, were given six months in which to visit other programs, speak with thoughtful people, examine the BLEND programs already in existence and learn from their successes and difficulties. We can do this without having to prepare lessons for tomorrow, respond to student writing, hold parent conferences, enter attendance in the red books, or make the thousands of daily decisions and judgment calls that classroom teachers must. On

the other hand, we spend a lot of time waiting for variables over which we have no control to sort themselves out. We wait for meetings to take place to which we aren't invited, with agendas about which we have no input, wait to hear what happened, wait for sites to "emerge."

Another difference is that here it is considered important that there be a team. Working in collaboration with someone very different from myself but whose skills are grounded in the same values is both attractive and necessary; it provides a check on how we see things. I remember walking out of a particularly difficult meeting a few weeks ago, in which I had been by turns confused, upset, ignorant, angry. As we left the building, I was deciding whether to cry or quit.

Trying to make change of this kind reminds me of the importance of community, of overcoming our separation from one another. It's difficult to achieve. Effective community provides great personal joy and strength. The times I've felt it, with family, with my sixth period English class, with friends, as a member of a social movement, have been times I've always wanted more in my life. They're worth working towards.

Bob said, "Boy! We have a lot to learn." The shock of his optimism was amazingly comforting. Our cooperation

has helped my perspective and my sanity, not necessarily in that order.

There are many attractions to setting up a new program. Learning is one. Cooperating is another. A third may be discovering how it'll be to have a whole bunch of people who share a common philosophy working together.

Other attractions I also explain to myself in terms of beliefs. Trying to make change of this kind reminds me of the importance of community, of overcoming our separation from one another. It's difficult to achieve. Effective community provides great personal joy and strength. The times I've felt it, with family, with my sixth period English class, with friends, as a member of a social movement, have been times I've always wanted more in my life. They're worth working towards.

Many of the most beautiful human relationships and values arise in the process of struggle, I heard someone say last night. He was talking about world politics and religious traditions; I was thinking about my new job and writing this article. It seemed appropriate for both of us. People have the capacity to find unsuspected sources of meaning in struggle. Surely that is what we try to examine with students when we engage in education together. It is difficult to keep from feeling helpless and hopeless about a lot of things these days. Maybe we can address some of this despair by not paying attention to expected outcomes but by getting involved in the struggle. That's how I interpret my dreams.

—Candy Systra
Project BLEND

Creating Communities of Learners

In this article, Suzanne Valenza tells a story that might also be read as an argument. It is a snap-shot of one unit that she taught with three other teachers at University Heights HS, an alternative school where teachers control everything from budgets to schedules and from curriculum to assessment. By picturing for us a few moments from this last semester, Suzanne begins to answer questions such as these: What would happen if teachers were given the power to plan the entire day for a group of students? What sorts of schedules would they create for themselves and for the students? How integrated would the curriculum be? How would teaching and learning change?

Tracie is in my office on the phone. She is talking with someone from the NYC Department of Sanitation, arranging a class trip to the Staten Island Landfill. Keisha is across the hall quietly practicing what she will say when she calls the Marcal paper recycling plant. Carlos is looking up bus companies in the Yellow Pages. He has never made a phone call like this before and is very nervous. He listens to Michael talk with the Campus Coach company, and plans what he will say when it is his turn.

Meanwhile, another group of students is working on a Macintosh computer designing the cover of the class publication on our waste reduction and recycling project. On the cover they plan to draw a globe stamped, "Handle with Care." They want each student in the class to submit one piece of writing for the publication.

A third group of students is discussing how to get a paper recycling program started. They know they want to make it easy for people to participate, but they can't figure out how they will get the paper to the recycling plant. Jose has computed that if the class collects 5,000 cans and returns them for the five cent deposit, the class could pay for the cost of renting the bus for the landfill trip.

All of the students described above are in a seminar called "Environmental Adventures" at University Heights HS. I taught this course along with Augusto Andres, Patrick Fox and Luis Reyes in the spring term of 1991. We decided to "experiment" during our last marking period of the year by having our students plan their own class project.

Elliot Wigginton had recently visited with some of our staff. After hearing the descriptions of his Foxfire work, we wanted to try out some of his ideas, and now we're looking forward to teaching more like this in the future. We began the unit by having the students write about what academic or learning skills they wanted to improve. We made a class list of such things as: expand our vocabulary; improve reading comprehension; develop our problem solving and thinking skills; write better grammatically; learn how to write interesting, creative, imaginative pieces of work; improve our speaking skills; learn how to type; learn Wordperfect; and prepare for the RCT's. Next we asked the group to list what they wanted to learn about our topic. They came up with questions that covered everything from how paper is recycled to how we can reduce the destruction of the ozone layer.

When we asked the students to plan activities that would meet our content and skill goals, trips became the major focus. The students not only planned where we would go, but also the questions we would ask and what written assignments we would do once we had returned. For the landfill trip the students planned seven different assignments including writing a letter to our tour guide, making recommendations on how to reduce garbage, and even a point of view piece in which the students write a day in the life of a piece of garbage.

The trip was a major success. Our first stop at the landfill was the marine station where the barges were unloaded into trucks which brought the garbage to one of the landfills. The odor was strong, but the impact of seeing 700 tons of garbage being unloaded was even stronger. We were all overwhelmed by the amount of trash we saw, and by hearing that 20,000 tons of garbage gets brought to the landfill each day. Alex commented that everyone in the city needed to come on this trip, and Richie worried what the future would be like if we didn't do something to reduce garbage right away.

The written assignments we received from the students were even more telling about the impact of our trip. Andrea wrote, "It never crossed my mind how dangerous the garbage problem can be in our lives and the future. I am looking forward to help start a recycling program here at B[ronx] C[ommunity] C[ollege], and hope it will become a success."

John wrote:

The trip was fun, it made me think of the steps we should use to recycle our garbage and be more careful on the stuff we buy that are not reusable like disposable razors, diapers, paper cups, plates and napkins and the list goes on.

Richie's letter to our Landfill tour guide sums up what I believe many students felt about the trip. It also reminded me of the importance of experiential learning.

One thing I cannot understand, (and I know this must cross you mind as well) if everyone wants to save our planet why can't we just do it. If this is something everybody wants why can no one achieve it. I know this trip to the landfill did something for me, it made me realize that if we don't do something soon we will be literally drowning in garbage. I think that everyone needs to take this trip and see what years of dumping has done to our planet, then maybe we will do something about it.

We didn't always teach this way at UHHS. In my school, the teaching staff is divided into three teams. Each team is responsible for the education of 100 students. Consistent with our school's model of group-management in which teachers are given the power to make decisions, each team is given the freedom to plan and implement their own curriculum. The group of teachers for whom I am the "team leader" had always taught

thematic, interdisciplinary seminars for two hours each morning and then two individual, more traditional, subject area classes after lunch. Last semester our team began talking about how the student apathy and cutting seemed to increase in the afternoon classes. It seemed to us that our students were more interested and more successful in their morning seminar classes. We also wanted to make our classes more project-based in order to get students actively involved in their learning.

After many discussions and the approval of the entire staff, we decided to teach all-day, project-based, multi-disciplinary seminars. We divided our team of eight teachers into two groups of four. Each group of four would be responsible for fifty students. It was up to each group to schedule the day, decide what they would teach, and how it would be taught. (Each group of four teachers also had what would be the equivalent of five periods of administrative work among them as well.)

Both groups decided to teach some combination of seminar-type classes and projects. The seminar classes met each morning for two hours. On some days we met in small groups to read, write or discuss content issues. Other days we had the entire group together for a movie, speaker, or trip. Three afternoons a week, the students were in one of three project groups. The projects ranged from photography to video documentary, to a class magazine, to a marine biology project. In each of these projects students were active. They collected water samples from the Hudson River. They built aquariums. They took photographs, developed film and made prints. They videotaped community issues and edited a documentary. For the remaining two afternoons of the week, the students had time for independent work. They could make up missed assignments, work in the computer lab, go to the library, or receive individual tutoring.

Perhaps one of our most pleasant surprises was the amount of team building that occurred by having one group of students together for the entire day. My students got closer to each other, often sharing personal struggles in class. Although some of this might specifically be credited to the many team-building and "trust activities" we did in class, we feel that the community of learners came together mainly because the students worked together for four hours each day. In a traditional setting, teachers often see more than 150 students each day. The students are in seven or more different classes per day, with as many different groups of people. With this constant change building trust is very difficult.

In our model, we were able to build a sense of community much more quickly and more deeply than I had ever done in a class before. This sense of community helped my students accomplish more work than other classes of mine ever did. Since the students trusted each other more they were able to work better together, take risks, support each other and succeed. It is for these reasons that my team and I have decided to continue teaching this way next year. Fortunately we work in a school where successful teaching experiments can quickly become institutionalized.

—Suzanne Valenza
University Heights HS

Project BESTWAY A Study in Student/Teacher Collaboration

Marie C. Giacone coordinates the Foreign Language/ESL Department at Louis D. Brandeis HS and has been instrumental in successfully launching a dual language program for English speaking students and Spanish speaking students who want to learn each other's languages. In this article, she describes Project BESTWAY and how it works.

When we first contemplated instituting Project BESTWAY at Louis D. Brandeis High School, we knew the feeling of excitement that comes when faced with welcomed challenge. We were determined to create a program for high school students which had never successfully been done before. It was to center on a content area curriculum which would foster the learning of English and Spanish while at the same time promoting and broadening multicultural exchanges among the students and faculty involved in the project. We were responding to a request for a proposal to plan and later implement a two-way bilingual program whereby English Proficient [EP] and Limited English Proficient [LEP] students would take certain courses together, learn about each others' cultures and work together cooperatively in a common educational setting. And so, Project BESTWAY was conceived: a partial immersion program whose acronym stands for the "Brandeis English Spanish Two-Way" program.

What is Project BESTWAY?

In the Spring of 1989, three faculty members--the Bilingual Coordinator, Laurel Ortiz, the ESL teacher, Marion Halberg, and the coordinator of the department of Foreign Languages and ESL, Maria Giacone set--about to write the planning grant to develop the program. It became apparent to us early in our task that planning a two-way program for high school students would be especially difficult. There were too many restrictions and requirements built into the standard educational model. The highly structured day divided into eight or nine forty-minute periods and prescribed curricula designed to have students succeed on state tests left little room for flexibility, innovation, creativity. After an intense period of research and brainstorming, we came up with a viable design for our two-way program.

The heart of the program was a specially created communications curriculum. Project BESTWAY basically comprises four periods of the students' day. The communications class, which is the core of the program, consists of a population made up of approximately 50% LEP students and 50% EP students. The language of instruction alternates every week from English to Spanish. For example, during "Week One," all students of the

Please see BESTWAY, next page . . .

BESTWAY . . . *continued from previous page*

class are taught exclusively in English by one of two communications teachers thus creating a partial immersion program in English for the LEP population of the class. During "Week Two," all students of the class are taught exclusively in Spanish by the other of the two communications teachers thus creating a partial immersion program in Spanish for the EP population of the class. There are two sections of the communications class, section A and section B. Both sections are taught during the same period in adjoining rooms. Each teacher teaches one section one week then switches to the other section the following week so that while section A is being taught in English, section B receives similar instruction in Spanish. The following week, section A is taught in Spanish while section B is taught in English, and so on. At all times there is a continuity of instruction. There is never a repetition in one language of what has occurred the previous week in the other language. Similar to the communications class is the physical education class. This also is taught alternately in Spanish and English to a mixed group of LEP and EP students. In addition, the LEP students of the program are enrolled in a specially designed ESL class while EP students take a specially designed Spanish as a Second Language class. All Project BESTWAY students are scheduled for the same lunch period.

The Collaborative Experience

Built into the BESTWAY design was a common preparation period for the teachers teaching the communications classes. These teachers would meet for daily updates in Project BESTWAY headquarters, and office where teachers and students met regularly to confer. Once a week, teachers would spend their prep hour carefully planning together the instructional activities for the following week although revision occurred daily as well. During this daily BESTWAY free hour, which corresponded to the students' lunch hour, students were encouraged to come for tutorial help or to plan BESTWAY activities. Students became involved in writing a weekly newsletter with the teachers which was alternately written in Spanish and English, and helped in the planning of extra-curricular activities such as trips and in-school social affairs. Parents also became involved. A separate newsletter was dedicated to them this year which, from time to time, featured articles written by the parents themselves. Parents also attended regular BESTWAY meetings. A network of collaboration and cooperation was thus established enabling students and faculty to participate optimally in a true communicative environ-

ment promoting fluency in two languages.

It is generally understood that language in its infinite diversity is the living expression of culture. Indeed, learning about each others' culture, accepting the similarities and differences, and experiencing pride and respect for one's own and another's culture became a central focus of the program. Three major groups were represented: Hispanic LEP students, Hispanic EP students and non-Hispanic EP students. Many cross-cultural issues came up from the very inception of the program and many were focused on in the two communications classes given in the first year of the program.

For the first semester (Fall term) of the first year of implementation, the communications class was entitled "Contemporary

Adolescent Concerns."

Topics of interest to teens were studied and analyzed. The details of the curriculum, which was designed by Marion Halberg, were fine-tuned by the teaching team during their common prep time as issues were brought up through class discussions. Some of the topics covered were differing perceptions (Who are we?), how teenagers are portrayed

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and viewed in society, the role of teenagers, how teenagers are different across the world and through time, how teenagers deal with family and friends, conflicts, responsibilities, and crisis situations, and how teenagers perceive the future. In addition to typical classroom activities like discussions, debates, readings, writings and film analysis, students also prepared a "time capsule" which included descriptions of what the future might want to know about teens today (done in Spanish); they interviewed family members about their experiences as teenagers (in English or Spanish); and the class prepared a handbook in both English and Spanish which sought advice for a myriad of problems that teens must face. Readers of this handbook are asked to "interact" with it by writing their own responses to the problems in the book.

The communications class was unique in our school not only because of the languages of instruction, but in its model of collaborative teaching. In the second semester of the first year, a different approach was employed. Students were grouped together in one class instead of two different sections (this was possible because the program had fewer students due to a variety of problems: students who needed other credits, programming problems, etc.). This time two teachers, Emma Abreu and Marion Halberg, team taught the class, each one responsible on alternate weeks for leading the class in her language of specialty. The teacher who did not lead the class participated and assisted. This was an ideal situation for both teachers and students. The students, who already knew one another from the previous semester and from their other BESTWAY classes, were able to see the teachers in dual roles as facilitators and as class participants. The teachers

were able to learn more about the students because they were freed to some degree from the burden of singlehandedly coping with lateness, attendance, and other administrative details. Classes were lively and constantly changing based on the previous day's experience. This second semester communications class was entitled "Decision Making." Topics covered were real life decisions concerning peers, relationships, drugs, sexuality, marriage and interrelationships.

Many students had entered Project BESTWAY with pre-established notions concerning the culture and outlook of the groups represented in the project. The conflicts between these groups were dealt with head on. Students wrote about their feelings and the school's crisis mediator became involved. As a result, some students subsequently became peer mediators. Films like *Crossover Dreams* were analyzed to explore the various facets of being from a cultural minority group trying to *fit in* with an often hostile mainstream society while still retaining cultural integrity. A major project for this semester was a video students prepared which included the story of a young athlete who was faced with the decision of whether or not to use drugs. His decision and its consequences are presented in the video. Students conceived of the idea, wrote the script, performed in and edited this video. Student groups who would otherwise have had little contact with each other gradually came to accept and respect each others' values and perceptions. More than gaining a surface knowledge of each others' language, they came to appreciate all the aspects touched by the experience of language ranging anywhere from musical expression to a deeper understanding of the complexities of the many divergent yet complimentary facets of the human cultural experience.

In the second year of the program the core communications classes have focused on writing through the computer and telecommunications. Again, a team of teachers is working collaboratively to develop appropriate curricula and materials for these partial immersion classes. All instructional activities are coordinated and planned jointly. Student input is a valued part of all planning.

Project BESTWAY has been revolutionary in many ways. The only two-way program on the high school level in the state of New York, it has set a precedent for dual language proficiency in an innovative manner. Through a partial immersion program students have not only strengthened their native and second language skills, they have gained profound insights into diverse cultures via direct communication while enhancing the appreciation of their own. Teachers, on their part, have put into effect successful models of student/teacher collaboration where the teaching/learning process becomes a cultural experience shared by all involved in the program.

—Maria C. Giacone
Louis D. Brandeis High School

You Noticed That Too? Students Reflect On A Core Experience

After all the official evaluating is said and done, what effect does a reform program really have on the students? The Newtown HS "Language and Learning Core" was cited as a "Center for Excellence in English" by the NCTE in 1989, but that wasn't enough for Ed Osterman, who has been the coordinator for five years. He went to the students themselves to find out what their experiences had been since their participation in the Core. Ed shares their surprising reactions and feelings in this article.

In the spring of 1986 teacher-consultants at the Writing Project asked the questions: What effect could a writing across the curriculum program have on a target population of students? What would happen to students who were taught by a team of teachers, all of whom were teaching subject area material through writing-to-learn techniques? With these questions in mind, the Writing Project revised the model of the Writing Teachers Consortium and, in September 1986, began a new effort designed to change the way that students write and learn. This program is called the Language and Learning Core.

The Language and Learning Core is a writing-across-the-curriculum program in which one hundred average tenth graders--students who would not normally be chosen for most drop-out prevention, honors, or remedial programs--are selected to participate each year. These students share the same four teachers for courses such as biology, English, history, and speech. At Newtown High School, one of several high schools with a Core, the four teachers work with me, a New York City high school teacher and a consultant for the New York City Writing Project, to design lessons and plan activities that will engage our students' interest and reflect a writing-to-learn model. As coordinator of the Language and Learning Core at Newtown High School since 1986, I taught the English class for the first two years of the program. I also meet individually with each of the Core teachers at least once a week to plan, team-teach, prepare materials, or produce publications of student writing in each subject area. The five of us share a free period and once a week hold a regular staff meeting. In addition, I conduct an after-school graduate course in the teaching of writing across the curriculum that is open to the Core teachers as well as other members of the faculty.

One of the major goals of the program is to encourage the use of writing as a tool for learning in any subject area. In Core classes, then, students use writing in a variety of ways at a variety of points in a lesson: to speculate about an unfamiliar topic, to raise questions, to summarize what they've learned. Core students are also accustomed to writing in a variety of genres for

Please see Students, next page . . .

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a variety of audiences. They keep journals and response logs for themselves, but they write and perform dialogues and monologues for each other. They do expressive writing for themselves, but also write and revise pieces that are shared in small groups and then published in newsletters and magazines or displayed on bulletin boards. Writing, sharing, revising, and publishing are, in fact, a regular part of all Core classes.

And, of course, the Core teachers work as a team. The block programming enables Core teachers to design activities that go across the curriculum. Thus, certain types of writing are used in all four Core classes so that students not only get practice doing it, but also get to see how one form or mode can be used to illuminate a broad range of subject matter. In addition, teachers can collaborate so that the history and English teacher may work out a unit together while the biology and speech teacher may design something together at a later time.

In addition, the teacher-consultant has the freedom to move in and out of different Core classes at different times in the day, sometimes teaching a history lesson and at other times assisting in speech class. This reinforces in students' minds the idea that they are working with a team of professionals who are in daily contact with one another.

But is this what students see? What is important to them? I wondered in 1989. For two consecutive years the Newtown Language and Learning Core had been evaluated by the New York City Board of Education. Students wrote essays at the start of the year and then again in June. Students completed attitude surveys and attendance records; reading scores and grades on competency exams were examined. Participating Core teachers were interviewed.

Still, I couldn't help feeling that, as conscientiously as this was all carried out, the evaluators had missed something. They never interviewed any of the students. What did the students think of the Language and Learning Core? Were there things our students noticed or experienced that didn't get on those attitude surveys or couldn't be reflected in a pre or post composition? Most important, what happened to our students once they left us and became part of the mainstream in a school of 4500 students? Did they still write a lot? Had we made a lasting impact on them? Casual conversations in the hallway with other staff members and some of the students suggested some answers, but I wanted to know more. While on sabbatical in 1989 I went into the school several days to interview some of the students from the previous year's Core. The ten students I spoke with were randomly selected by Core teachers and I interviewed them in small groups. They were eleventh graders at the time of our

conversations and had participated in the third year of the program, a year that had not been evaluated by any formal means and a year in which the Core had been coordinated by another teacher.

I loved the writing. Now my writing is messing up. You notice that too? (To a girl sitting next to her in the interview.) I don't practice writing too much. In the WP, I used to write good, not to sound conceited or anything. My English teacher now told me I write better than most students in her class. But this year, it's like the writing is . . . not good. Just read the book and write the answers. There's no creativity. — Gina

Formal test results indicated that our students' competency in writing as well as their attitude towards writing had improved; my interviews begin to suggest why. Students indicated that they

were not writing nearly as much in their classes the year I interviewed them as they had the year before, both in terms of length and frequency. Most of the students I

I think it was not just the focus on writing in all four Core classes that made such an impact on many of our students. It was also the fact that the writing was used in a variety of ways, that students had opportunities to write about themselves and their feelings (very important for sophomores), and that writing was read aloud and published frequently.

spoke to said that English was the only subject in which they were doing any extensive writing. Moreover, Gina's comment indicates that she felt her writing had deteriorated, despite the positive response she got from her current English teacher. One reason for this may be that she was simply not writing enough. On the other hand her remark "There's no creativity" suggests she wanted more imaginative topics to write about or, at least, more varied kinds of writing than just response to text.

All she wants is you know you read a book and do homework from that book. That's it. Nothing else about yourself. . . . And it isn't as much. — William

We can't write on and on like we used to. We just write like a paragraph, two paragraphs, and that's it. Like Miss S. last year. She expected us to write a lot. — Marilyn

Almost all of the students I interviewed said they were doing very little writing about their feelings or experiences. And they missed it. I think it was not just the focus on writing in all four Core classes that made such an impact on many of our students. It was also the fact that the writing was used in a variety of ways, that students had opportunities to write about themselves and their feelings (very important for sophomores), and that writing was read aloud and published frequently.

Last year things were organized. All of the teachers knew us. They were together. They knew how we were. But this year it's not like that. They're separate. They teach all different students. — William

We felt good that you talked about us, were having conversations about us. And not only about grades. — Frank

It seems apparent that the students were positively affected by the fact that the five Core teachers functioned as a cohesive unit. Our regular weekly meetings and informal discussions were used, of course, to plan projects, publications, and trips. However, they were also used to share information about students. It was relatively easy to compare a student's performance in all four disciplines and devise methods for helping students who were having trouble in one area or another. If one teacher had been in touch with a parent and found out something important, all of us immediately heard about it. If a student was having difficulty with, say, the biology teacher, the history teacher (with whom the student did get along well) was able to offer suggestions on how to work with her. The problem of selective cutting was minimized too, because if a student was absent from English one day but present for speech, it would be easy to find this out by simply comparing absentee lists each day. And, as Frank suggested, the students were aware that we met regularly. We would refer to these meetings in class; we let the students know of plans and projects that we had been discussing. This team effort further strengthened the students' vision of family, I think, and let them know we cared about them.

None of us who came into the WP . . . we didn't know nobody. Then as time passed, we got closer together. It's not like the WP no more. After this semester finishes, we're gonna have probably new teachers and new students and the WP is two terms straight, the same people. It's like friends. It's like family.— Frank

The word *family* was a term many of the interviewees used in referring to the Core. In a school of 4500 students which operates on two schedules, an incoming freshman or sophomore can be quite alienated and frightened. In our program, 100 students worked with each other in four of the same classes for the entire year. Friendships were quickly formed and emotional ties strengthened over time. Moreover, the team of five teachers remained the same too, so that students could grow comfortable with teaching methods and personalities, and teachers could more easily monitor and judge student progress. In New York City right now, many of the high schools are dividing their ninth grades into smaller mini-schools for the same reason. Young high school students, particularly in large urban schools, have less of a chance of feeling lost if they are working in a more intimate setting. This *family* feeling gives many of them the warmth and security they need to feel at ease in school. In this kind of atmosphere, surrounded by peers and teachers who know them well, students come to school regularly and gain the confidence to take risks as learners.

When I used to go to my WP classes, I would know everybody in there. Everybody would say, "How are you?" You know, chat a bit. Now you just go to your classes like . . . me and only me. You don't care about other people. — Tanya

This year I see people from my class in the halls, they don't even look at you. I don't look at them. It's like walk, forget it, I don't know you. Before it was like more together. The bond of friendship was much different. — Lisette

Without realizing it, the interviewees indicated that the positive relationships that were formed provided an atmosphere that enabled them to grow as learners. In discussing what some of their classes were like this year, nearly all the students bemoaned the lack of student participation:

This year nobody participates cause they're afraid if they get the answer wrong, everybody's gonna make fun of them or laugh at them and then they're gonna be insulted. So, everybody just stays quiet. . . . Even if you do give the wrong answer, it doesn't matter cause when they correct you, you're learning. But a lot of students don't see it that way. They see if you give the wrong answer, like you're a dummy. — Frank

The WP kids, we knew each other. It doesn't really matter if we make a fool of ourselves or if we get it wrong. Sometimes, it's better to get it wrong than right cause you learn. — Lisette

There is confidence about the learning process that comes through in these comments. Somehow, the fear of giving the wrong answer does not grip Core students as tightly as it does many other sophomores. There are several explanations for this. First, it is partially the result of the security they felt from working with the same students and teachers for a year. It may also be the result of the extensive amount of small group work that occurred in each of the four Core classes. Over the year Core students continually experienced the verbal give and take of small group work. Sometimes, they worked in teams or triads. At other times, they operated in larger groups of five or six. They were continually "reporting back" to the whole class after each small group session and, when projects were completed, they were presenting their work to the entire class. This structure occurred several times in all four Core classes, particularly in speech. Indeed, a year of speech and drama helped immeasurably in giving our students the confidence to participate in the class. The shift in emphasis from a teacher-dominated classroom to a student-centered one instantly increases the amount of student interaction.

Last year everybody used to work together. The teacher would get you in a group, everybody. . . . Talking to your friend can answer you better than the teacher. We can communicate better as two kids rather than a grown-up and a kid. — Andy

Please see Students, next page . . .

Students . . . *continued from previous page*

In the WP we learned from other students. We learned what they thought and then we understood it more. — Gina

It's good to learn from other students . . . because you have the same understanding level and it's easier to interpret from other students. — Lisette

Core students came to believe that one of the advantages of small group work was that students can learn from one another. Whether they were explaining procedures in the biology lab or sharing reading log responses while analyzing a chapter in a novel or discussing the implications of a historical quote, they learned that through peer talk one can frequently make sense of subject area material without direct teacher intervention. As Andy and Lisette state, sometimes a peer can better explain complex ideas to you, because he or she can put them into familiar language or use appropriate references. Ultimately, most of our students became accustomed to a flexible and sometimes noisy learning environment in which teachers did not always dominate. They came to trust each other as well as their teachers.

So did talking to the students tell me anything the writing samples and computerized school attitude surveys did not? Most certainly. From the group interviews I held, I came to see that the writing had, in fact, been important to the students and that they were conscious of how much less it was being used in their current classes. I also now realize that our secondary goal of providing the students with a community made as strong an impact on them as had the primary goal of using writing-to-learn techniques in four major subject areas.

Interestingly, the students also pointed out a weakness to our work: we did not prepare them for the change in teaching and learning style that they would encounter for the next two years. While I am proud of the confidence many of our "average" students now possess as learners, it is also true that we may have been shortsighted in not realizing that some of them would find it difficult adapting to a lecture or whole-class style of learning, even though it was the educational model they had been accustomed to earlier. We had shown them an alternative model of learning; many of them had difficulty adjusting to the traditional high school model. . .

The teachers now . . . when the students don't raise their hands, you know, fine, they go through their lesson like, you know how they have it on the paper. And if you throw them off the track, like ask them a question that's not on the paper, they get upset with you. I'm there like "Oh my God!"

because I asked my teacher four times, because we're learning longitude and latitude and I don't understand it, asked her four times. . . . The minute I would ask her somebody would talk, she'd turn around, say shut-up, and she'd go back to the lesson. — Gina

Last year in the WP, everybody was talking in groups. I go to the bathroom and when I come back, everybody is ignoring me because they're busy in their own thing. This year you go to the bathroom, you come back and after you open the door, everybody's eyes are on you. That's an example of how boring it is. They have nothing to do but look. Last year they went, "Oh it's just Frank. Forget him."

— Frank

There appears to be something placid and set about the structure of some of these classes. The lack of student questioning and active student interaction frustrates our students (whereas it might comfort others). By talking with the students, I now realize that we should have done some writing and discussion about different ways of learning and the need to adapt to different teaching styles. Not to do so, perhaps, gave our students the false impression that the rest of their high school careers would be like the experience they had in the Language and Learning Core.

Just as the traditional means of assessment used by the Board did not quite tell us everything we wanted to know about the impact of our program, we may also need to look beyond the traditional classroom and school structures to nurture the kind of active learner we would all like our students to become. I think the success of the Language and Learning Core suggests certain directions for the future: the need for smaller communities of teachers and students within large urban settings; an increase in small group work and alternative classroom methods to lessen the dominance of teacher-controlled lessons; support (in the form of a common free time for meetings and planning) for teachers to work in teams. And, above all else, we need to keep in mind that all of this may still not work unless the teachers are teaching from a consistent philosophy so that certain techniques and concepts are repeated from subject to subject.

I am proud of the work my colleagues and I have done these past five years; the students have helped me to understand why. We should let them speak more often, and we should listen.

—Ed Osterman
Writing Teachers Consortium

Book Reviews

We asked two of our teacher-consultants to review a new book by a consultant from the Teachers College Writing Project. (Lucy Calkins' TCWP is not affiliated with NYCWP, nor with the National Writing Project.)

WALKING TREES: Teaching Teachers in New York City Schools, (Heinemann, 1991) is Ralph Fletcher's personal memoir of his work as a consultant during the 1985-1986 school year. First Eve La Belle, then Nick D'Alessandro respond to Fletcher's stories about helping teachers to change.

I was delighted with the powerful metaphorical passages of Ralph Fletcher's book. Fletcher, a staff developer for the Teachers College Writing Project, describes, with great accuracy, the tremendous joys as well as the extreme degradation of a year spent working with teachers in New York City schools. I recognized the feeling of strong hope in the stories about the children he worked with, and the deep frustrations in trying to work in decaying environments often with hostile or very resistant teachers. He does not gloss over the reality of the old, worn buildings, burnt-out staff or the gross economic inequities in various schools and districts. But he also made me respond to his excitement and surprise at what the children wrote when asked to write about something important to them.

I agree with him wholeheartedly that kids need to write, and that teachers need "professional nourishment." It is extremely helpful for teachers to set aside time for discussions with colleagues, thus getting a perspective on the problems and issues that come up while working in the classroom. Facilitating the writing process means change will not always be immediately visible but generally slow and gradual; as a co-worker of Fletcher's put it, "Writing matters a lot for these kids because it gives them a way to make sense of their lives" (p. 117). These ideas, although not new to me, were important to reread; they renewed my understanding and faith in the writing process and nudged me forward.

Although part of the book's subtitle is *Teaching Teachers*, in its first sections Ralph Fletcher writes about his work with kids. As I continued reading this began to make perfect sense, and I made a strong connection between Fletcher's work at Teachers College and our own at the NYC Writing Project. We don't *teach* teachers in the generic sense; rather we write with them, talk with them, and sometimes go into their classrooms to work with their students. It became clear that the book is an account of teaching teachers largely reflected in the work Ralph Fletcher did in classrooms with children.

It was well worth taking the time to read *Walking Trees*. The actual trees take one step every hundred years. The image of the phrase, walking trees, captures the sense of the task Fletcher had to grapple with, the mammoth obstacles that he faced every day. Like Fletcher, those of us who teach teachers move slowly toward our goal of making a dent and affecting a change among teachers in the New York City school system--a system that rarely serves the needs of its children or teachers.

—Eve La Belle
IS 217M

A staff developer in one of the Brooklyn districts mentioned in Ralph Fletcher's new book, *Walking Trees: Teaching Teachers in New York City Schools*, recently walked into a teacher's classroom and announced to her special education class, "I am the best teacher in the city and I'm here to train your teacher. You are lucky boys and girls to have me here." The class, already annoyed at losing gym, turned hostile then: they thought *their* teacher was the best in the city. The teacher, with honors and distinction of her own, and practiced in district politics, shrugged her shoulders. Just the latest staff developer on an ego trip.

Staff development, especially in writing, is a difficult and tricky process. My experience as a teacher working with a staff developer from the Teachers College Writing Project was extremely positive. But my job as a staff developer for the NYCWP was harder. We want to bring teachers what we know, but we want to do it in a way that is respectful of their own knowledge and experience. When we are trying to move teachers to shift the balance of power in their classrooms, we cannot do it by replicating the traditional paradigm of the learner as consumer and the staff developer as expert. The relationship must be collaborative if it is to succeed. Fletcher does the best he can, within the limits of his staff development model.

Fletcher has learned the lesson that all of us who have worked with Lucy Calkins of Teachers College eventually learn: tell stories. So he describes his time in the schools in a personal narrative. Rather than reading a text on Principles and Problems of Staff Development in a Writing Program, we experience them in terms that anyone who has worked with teachers (or is a teacher) can remember: walking by a difficult teacher's room in the hope that she won't see him; talking to a principal who spends most of his time in his comfortable office; having to run into the hall to laugh over some bizarre occurrence in a classroom; and, finally, getting past the teachers to the children whose lives so touch Fletcher's own.

The title, which comes from a student's piece, is Fletcher's metaphor for staff development. Early in the book he reports a principal's comment: "The central truth to all staff development is that *teachers are resistant to change*" (italics his). He concludes: "... this is precisely what I have been trying to do all year long: to encourage big and ponderous trees to lift up their roots and take a step, even a small step, even if it would be the only step they would take all year."

I was as uncomfortable with this generalization at the end of the book as I was at the beginning, and I wonder if some of Fletcher's experience is the result of the Teachers College staff development model. Teachers in some of Fletcher's schools were mandated, not invited, by the principal or the district office, to do the training - an immediate cause for professional resentment. At that time Teachers College Writing Project trainers came into teachers' classrooms with a program - the writing workshop - worked for a few weeks, and then moved on to another school. Aside from periodic conferences at the college, teachers did not usually have the opportunity to develop ongoing professional relationships with the staff developer.

Another clue is provided by a staff developer at one of Lucy

Please see Reviews, next page...

Reviews. . . . *continued from previous page*

Calkins' Thursday meetings: "... the quality of the process teachers go through is not the same as the process kids go through. In some ways the kids go through a richer experience in the writing workshop."

Lucy's response is, "Right, the kids are writing. The teachers are on the outside, watching." I have long thought that the advantage of our own Writing Project is that the teachers who choose to work with us go through a writing process themselves. We don't usually expect teachers to teach a process they have not directly experienced.

I was one of the teachers who met with Ralph Fletcher in the year he describes, but I had worked with Teachers College's Marilyn Boutwell the year before and already had a full program of writing workshops. I had also had the experience of Lucy Calkins' Summer Institute. Because of this background, I was able to welcome Ralph as a valued support and collaborator, but I observed the limited success he had with other teachers who, in one principal's words, "have seen every dog-and-pony show around come down from the district, only to be replaced by a new one the next year," and sometimes resented a new program that seemed to come out of a university rather than their own needs and interests.

While Fletcher can recoil at the tacky dreariness of a teacher's cafeteria and get the place exactly right - it is one of the book's achievements that he makes us feel what he sees - he comes into the school "on a rough kind of professional parity with the principal," and can leave when he wants, unlike the teachers who eat there every day. One of Fletcher's principals understands how things work in the schools: "Writing process is an approach that asks teachers to give students some measure of independence, some control over their own learning. That's a hard thing for teachers to give children when they've never really had it for themselves."

Fletcher uses his story-telling skill to make many points against the system. He describes the conditions, from the appalling to the merely unlovely, that teachers and students work under. He shows us the burnt-out teachers, bitter after too many years in a system they no longer understand. He lets the well-meaning principals trying to improve their schools speak for themselves. And he fills the book with children whose stories of loss and death reflect his personal preoccupations at this time in his life.

One of the best things about the book, in fact, is Fletcher's honesty. In *Walking Trees* we watch his marriage fall apart as he goes in and out of his schools. What Fletcher says about conferring with children becomes true of the reader in relation to the narrator: "In writing conferences, children taught me: about their families, friends, vacations, fears, as well as what they know about writing."

When it comes to teachers, however, Fletcher seems less willing to learn. My own work has been enriched by what I have seen and learned in other teachers' classrooms. In a book about working with teachers I'd like to know more about them than their resistance, failures and eccentricities.

—Nick D'Alessandro
Hudson River Middle School

Connections

Where is the good news?

Most of us are familiar with the crises that we face in urban schools, but how many of us feel connected to the exciting movements for school change that have been organized by progressive educators over the past ten years? We plan to help you to make such connections through this column.

Since the publication of *A Nation At Risk* eight years ago, members of our government have not lacked for pulpits from which to broadcast their insidious plans for "reform," with George Bush adding his empty recommendations this last Spring. Echoing through the popular media are their calls for merit pay, cultural literacy, exclusive canons, rote learning of "the basics," higher minimum standards measured by more standardized tests, a national curriculum, voucher plans. . . .

Their voices are so loud that it may come as a surprise that another, oppositional agenda is being pursued by progressive educators, both locally and nationally. Included in this agenda are grassroots efforts to bring teachers and parents together, to reduce class size, to create small schools of choice, to democratize schools, to create alternative, direct measures of success, to find new structures for accountability, and to develop inclusive curriculums that teach young people how to fight domination in their lives--whether it be homophobia, racism, sexism, or economic injustice. These are educators who believe that "school reform must be guided by a broad vision of social change, consciously linked to the struggle for democracy, equality, and social justice."

The language that I used at the end of this last paragraph comes from a "Statement of Principles" published by the Coalition of Education Activists. Ever heard of it? Probably not. I hadn't either, not until I read about their first conference in *Z Magazine* several months ago, but more on this below. What we want to do in this column is to connect you to new groups and organizations like the Coalition of Education Activists. We'll collect any information that comes our way which seems to reflect the broad vision referred to above. We'll list organizations, workshops and conferences, names of writers to look out for, titles of books, articles, columns, magazines, and newsletters growing from this movement of progressive educators.

We intend this to be an occasional column where we can all help each other to stay informed with what is being written about and what is happening in this movement for school change. Please make copies of any articles or announcements that you think should be included in "Connections," and send them to the Newsletter.

Here are a few things that have caught my attention recently. Stan Karp, who describes himself as a "leftwing high school teacher" (*Radical Teacher*, Winter 1991, p. 32), is as good a writer to start with as any because he seems centrally interested in charting the development of this progressive change. Two of his recent articles in *Z Magazine* include a thoughtful report on the formation of a new national coalition of education activists, complete with that group's "Statement of Principles," quoted

above, and a inspiring, behind-the-scenes report on Milwaukee's "Rethinking Schools" movement and newspaper. Karp not only reports on this movement, he is a part of it. In a recent issue of the *Rethinking Schools*, Karp has a front page article in which he describes court decisions in four states which "have declared existing funding arrangements illegal, primarily because of disparities in spending between rich and poor school districts." Karp concentrates on New Jersey's frustrating attempts to translate such court directives into legislation, and concludes:

Equity in school funding is a goal worth fighting for, but like most solutions to the fundamental problems facing our schools, it is likely to be won only as part of a broad movement for social justice that changes the priorities and the structure of our nation.

This gives added meaning to the word "restructuring," does it not?

The feature that Stan Karp writes for, "Lesson Plans," appears every other month or so in *Z Magazine*, with his most recent column in the June 1991 issue. In this piece, Karp considers the question, "Is All Black And All Male All Right?" He quotes a broad spectrum of voices to try to understand the recent call for separate, male, Black schools, finally presenting a understandably complex view himself.

On one hand he argues:

However much these separate educational environments may be justified for a time by a particular set of conditions, they still shouldn't be embraced as the ideal arrangement.

Effective multicultural education ultimately depends on being able to acknowledge, accept, and debate differences. These are skills all schools, including Afrocentric ones, must teach.

Then on the same page (91) Karp concedes:

Where Afrocentric programs empower students, teachers and parents, where they motivate learners by making their past and present more visible, and the future more hopeful, and where they respond constructively to critics of potential biases and shortcomings, they can be a breath of fresh air in a stifling, crisis-ridden school system. As usual, their success will depend on democratic activism especially by committed black educators and parents, and ongoing, open debate over means and ends.

With Karp around, we can find access to the "ongoing, open debate[s] over means and ends" in many areas of progressive education.

Here's where to find these four articles by Stan Karp:

Stan Karp, "Lesson Plans: Rethinking Schools," *Z Magazine* (June 1990), pp. 6-10.

_____, "Rich Schools, Poor Schools, and the Courts," *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (January/February 1991), pp. 1 & 14-15.

_____, "Lesson Plans: Education Activists Form New Coalition," *Z Magazine* (March 1991), pp. 98-100.

_____, "Lesson Plans: Is All Black and All Male All Right?" *Z Magazine* (June 1991), pp. 87-91.

Z Magazine, "an independent political magazine of critical

thinking on political, cultural, social, and economic life in the United States... [which] aims to assist activist efforts to attain a better future," is published monthly except for one issue in July/August. Write to *Z Magazine*, 150 West Canton Street, Boston, MA 02118. One year \$25, two years \$40, three years \$55.

Rethinking Schools is another highly recommended source for keeping track of movements for radical educational change. This newspaper has been published for five years now by a progressive educators and activists in the Milwaukee area, and more recently nationally. Here is how they describe their "educational journal":

We hope that Rethinking Schools gives teachers, parents, and students an effective voice in determining the future of our schools. We encourage our readers to join us in our discussions and debate on educational issues, including the following...

... What must be done to overcome the significant racial, gender, and class inequalities which prevent many students from receiving an equal and effective education? What specific approaches can teachers use to empower students within the classroom and community? How can we make meaningful, community-based work experience an integral part of each child's education? What can we do to insure that multicultural and anti-racist education takes place?

Write to *Rethinking Schools* at 1001 E. Keefe Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53212, or call 414-964-9646. One year subscriptions are \$10 for individuals and \$25 for organizations and institutions.

In the same issue of *Rethinking Schools* from which Stan Karp was quoted about courts and school funding, there are also interesting articles and reviews by Lisa Delpit (on Vivian Paley's *White Teacher*) and Herbert Kohl (on "The Portrayal of Rosa Parks in Children's Literature"), as well as other thought-provoking pieces. For example, Robert Lowe writes a timely article in which he presents "The Perilous Consequences Of Choice." As he writes, arguments in favor of school choice plans are rapidly "becoming a major policy issue affecting schools in the United States today" (p. 3). As an educator in Milwaukee, Lowe's perspective is particularly interesting because his city has one of the "model" choice programs, a program held up as an example in a recent, influential book by John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*.

While Chubb and Moe have become popular talking heads whenever educational reform is discussed in the media, facts such as these quoted from Lowe's article are never mentioned. Lowe writes:

The Milwaukee Parent Choice Program (its future now in doubt because of litigation) has received attention far out of proportion to its immediate impact. In a district that enrolls close to 100,000 students, the program was originally intended to provide 1,000 low-income students with \$2,500 each so that they might attend the non-sectarian private schools of their choice. Even though more than 1,000 families applied fewer than 400 students ultimately enrolled in the seven private schools that agreed to participate.

From these and other facts, Lowe argues that choice plans will provide "Neither Excellence Nor Equality For All."

Please see Connections, next page...

Connections . . . *continued from previous page*

He might get an argument from a New York educator, Deborah W. Meier, who is the principal of Central Park East Secondary School and the founder of The Center for Collaborative Education. In the March 4, 1991 issue of *The Nation*, Meier argues that progressive educators should not reject the notion of choice as quickly as we often do. By outlining the last decade of work in Manhattan's District Four, she is able to make a convincing and inspiring case for district restructuring around a movement for small, *public* schools of choice. If your local or school library doesn't keep back issues of *The Nation* available, the magazine's reprint and subscription address is P.O. Box 10791, Des Moines, IA 50340-0791. New subscribers pay \$15 for six months.

Deborah Meier won a MacArthur Award a few years ago, and used her prize money to further expand her work at Central Park East Schools by founding The Center for Collaborative Education (CCE). There are now 10 primary schools and four high schools that are members of this organization which represents real and radical reform within New York City's public schools. For a listing of the Center's principles and for their most recent newsletter, write to CCE, 1575 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10029 or call 212-348-7821. CCE is a relatively new organization, but one to keep your eye on.

Finally, one more local voice. If you haven't seen it yet, get your hands on the exciting, new newspaper, *School Voices*. Springing from the organized opposition to recent budget cuts, and modeled on *Rethinking Schools*, *School Voices* gives progressive educators and parents a much needed forum in which to discuss issues of concern to themselves and their children and students. The cover of the Summer 1991 issue has an update on the "Save Our Schools" movement, and inside is an editorial listing a ten-point program for "Improving Schools and Fighting Budget Cuts." Included in this issue are parents' stories about schools that have failed their children, an article about Italian-Americans, "The Forgotten Dropouts," an interview with a Dominican educator, students' pieces speaking out against homophobia, and a critique of Bush's education plan. Nearly half of this much-expanded second issue of *School Voices* is a "Special Supplement: Multicultural Education and Empowerment." This one's hot!

To subscribe to *School Voices*, write to PACE/Advocates for Children, 79 Leonard Street--Basement, New York, NY 10013, or call 212-274-1324. Individual subscriptions are \$10 for one year, \$15 for two years. Institutional subscriptions are \$20 and \$40. Students and unemployed, \$5.

That's all for now. Don't forget to send us bits of information that point toward progressive school change.

—Paul R. Allison
University Heights HS

Teachers As Writers

An Afternoon Off

Let's kill a goat.
This was a suggestion
to which I happily agreed as I was in the mood
for some nasty violence that
wouldn't do anyone
any harm.
So we rattlesnaked
our way through the woods,
main flooring it, too tired
to climb to the shepherds where old goats hang
around with cowbells
tied to their necks bleating,
and they're dirty, stubborn
too. We snuck
around the trees
making all sorts of noise
until we found one
and he was wearing
a big old bell
just like I said. At this point
I covered my ears, closed
my eyes because, despite the fact
I was itching to rub my hands
along the slippery innards of a newly slit goat,
I don't believe in the killing.
I could say we found the goat lying
on its side, near death,
but that wouldn't be true.
We had to kill, my friend
did that part,
to get what we wanted,
bloodied membrane and soaked organ.
Warm it was, the inside
of that animal.
and we wet ourselves
to the elbows
in mucus and gluey
red stuff. It felt good. I'm sorry
to admit it felt good.
My friend then said we should lift our shirts,
go belly to belly
against the guts.
Later we would smell,
but for now we could forget.
And later we did smell,
had to use a good, grease cutting
dish washing liquid to clean
the entrails stuck to our skin.
The goat we left in the woods to dry out on its own.

—April Krassner

Ornamentation

Everyday she wore a necklace. No other jewelry, just a necklace. In the sixties she wore feathers, and if she had been old enough in the fifties, would have worn pearls. That is to say, she was middle-aged, had been celibate for years. The accessories were of no use.

One day she showed up wearing a necklace of shoes. All the footwear appeared worthless, old except for the patent leather Mary Jane, a party shoe from girlhood. On one side of it hung a discarded sandal, on the other a beige flat. Pumps, scuffed boots, unlaced sneakers, slippers banged against her chest.

She said she liked the way the necklace set off her black dress, or was it the way black dress displayed the shoes? But it burdened, weighing her down more than any jewelry had before. Her head bowed under the heaviness. Her hips and shoulders were sore. She threw her back out.

The simple thing would have been to give up, but she was wedded to habit tattooing her ankles and oiling her toenails weekly while maintaining the neck chain of leather uppers and stiletto heels. She cultivated her crooked posture curving her body into a skeletal loop.

—April Krassner

Recidivism

When I was young, I wanted the things in other people's houses. I wanted the food they served: yellow puddings and ice cream cones. The board games: Parcheesi, Chinese Checkers, Chutes and Ladders. I wanted the chairs, the Flintstone jelly glasses and dresses with big skirts that didn't itch from crinolines sewn at the waist. I had a red dress with a white bib and collar and five tiny, seed buttons. My sister had the same one. We had several same ones, blue Easter suits with red piping even though we were Jewish, green velvet sailor dresses for Christmas and brown corduroy jumpers. I wore each dress twice, my own and then my sister's, but the hers which became mine didn't fit. The waist was in a different place, or the skirt too long, or it bunched. My mother had words for these difficulties, words like "long-waisted," "short-waisted," and "darts," which she'd say cigarette dangling as she came on her knees to pin the hems. Or, she'd mumble, "You'll grow into it," leaving me dangling inside the cloth, my arms zig-zagging to get to the zipper in the back. I wore each dress twice and it was as if I never grew, never got out, but kept getting sent back to the beginning which felt old and saggy and used. I once did take something from a girl's house. We weren't even good friends, but she didn't care. It was a doll, a Patty Play Pal, almost as big as me with straight brown hair and hard to carry the long, bumpy street home. I just wanted it for a little while, but my parents made me take it back immediately that whole way by myself.

—April Krassner

Steal These Ideas

Ginny Rust, Mary Ann Barakso and Pat Adducci, NYPL Centers for Reading and Writing, are using video as a springboard for discussion and inquiry into American History. Recently they held a two-session workshop for adult literacy students at the predominantly West Indian Wakefield center in the North Bronx.

Ginny introduced a timeline. She talked about how a timeline can give a picture of a particular time period in history and the idea of using a timeline in writing personal narrative. The group compared a timeline of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, about one hundred years earlier. They posted the timelines along a ramp leading down into the classroom.

Then Pat showed materials in the Center's collection that relate to this period, including *The Black Americans: A History in their Own Words*, a collection of personal narratives, *The People Could Fly*, folk tales retold by Virginia Hamilton, and *The Freedom Side and Last Chance for Freedom*, fictional accounts of a slave's journey to freedom and life in Canada and the texts of King's "I Have a Dream" and the Emancipation Proclamation. Some groups read the materials aloud and some groups read silently. Students and tutors walked through the timeline posted along a ramp and chose readings.

The second session began with a review of the predictions from the previous session and a discussion of the summary of the film and they watched the 50 minute video. Students, staff and tutors spent about an hour writing and sharing their writing, which was not nearly enough time. Ginny reports that she'd like to follow up the workshop with a collection of student and tutor writing done at that session, further research and maybe more reading aloud.

Benedicta Schwager, Christopher Columbus HS, has been experimenting with different writing activities with her ESL class reading *Growing Up* by Russell Baker. She has found reading journals, or "lit logs" to be very useful. Sometimes she assigned a question to answer in the journal, or gave a sentence starter or told students to write whatever came to mind. The main idea, she continually stressed, was to relate Russell's experiences to their own. Sometimes the logs were a gold mine for discussion or a longer, more developed piece. The themes that were generated during the first brainstorm session at the beginning of the book: death, the depression, responsibilities, family conflicts and politics came up again and again in writing and discussion.

As the time approached to begin a final piece, Benedicta began to explore the idea of theme in different ways. The class discussed the themes of chapters, reading assignments and books and how they related to their childhoods. One day they brainstormed all the themes in the book, and Benedicta made copies of this outline, which they referred to often. Students chose one of the themes of the book, wrote for ten minutes, then jotted down answers to the following questions: "Who else was involved in this that you left out? What else happened that you didn't

include? Why is this topic interesting to you . . . interesting enough to write about?" The next day students came in, began to write, and wrote and revised for the next few days until they finished.

The writing workshop introduced in this ESL class was an experiment. Benedicta was fortunate, she says, because she got instant feedback from Ed Osterman on everything she tried. The class tried freewriting, point of view writing, literature logs, revising, conferencing and text rendering. Of course, some ideas worked well and some didn't, but at least no one groaned when they sat down to write. On the contrary, every student was ready and able to spend much more time and thought on each draft than at the beginning of the year. And that, Benedicta Schwager says, is worthwhile.

Alice Joyce-Alcala, Murray Bergtraum HS, teaches creative writing. Her goal is to expose the relatively inexperienced readers in her class to varied literary techniques used by modern authors. She selected *The Woman Warrior*, by Maxine Hong Kingston, because it is contemporary and autobiographical. Kingston weaves mythic elements throughout her writing, and she intertwines fantasy and reality. She taps into her reservoir of family mythology and explores cultural and generational differences. Alice wanted her students to do the same thing.

The book opens with a section called, "No Name Woman," a semi-legendary account of an ancestor whose tragic story influences the narrator. Alice asked her students to interview their parents, grandparents and other relatives to recall a story that they heard in their families. She asked them to read "No Name Woman," and they discussed what might have actually happened and the family myths which grew in the retellings. She shared a story about her great great grandmother who was said to have come back from the grave to put a curse on her successor, the 16 year old girl who married her great great grandfather. Another section of the book, "Shaman," describes the narrator's mother before the narrator was born. Students read this section and interviewed their family elders about important aspects of their lives.

Since the book is largely concerned with ethnic identity and the rift between the generations, Alice asked students to write about their own ethnic backgrounds. This writing was the most moving and the most successful of all. She told them that since everyone would be required to share, they should leave anything out of their writing that was too private for public reading. Students read, row by row, without any comments in between. It was very dramatic. Students asked her to share as well, and she did. After everyone read, they wrote and shared their reactions to the experience.

The lessons went well. Alice's goal of encouraging students to tap into their life experiences and make connections with literature was realized. The class grew closer. Next, they will explore their sexual identities and the expectations of their friends, families, culture, television and themselves.

—Bryna Diamond
NYPL Centers for Reading and Writing

Project Notes

Congratulations to The Institute for Literacy Studies on its first three publications: **Five Schools: The Story of the Lowenstein Foundation School Improvement Grant** by Carla Asher, Cynthia Carrasquillo, Barbara Jackson, Linette Moorman, Richard Sterling, and Ronni Tobman-Michelen; **Hidden Treasures: An Annotated Bibliography of Puerto Rican, Nuyorican, and Caribbean Literature for Use in Adult Basic Education with Sample Reading Selections and Suggested Teaching/Learning Activities**, by Azi Ellowitch; and **Time to Reflect: Research by Teachers on Sabbatical** by Marilyn Altabet, Carole Ackerson Bertisch, Nancy Billy, Sallyann Keith, Anne Micera, Marsha Slater, and Ronni Tobman-Michelen (edited by Carla Asher and Nancy Wilson). All were honored at the April 27 meeting of the NYCWP. If you missed it, books are available for sale at the Institute office.

More published writers among us. Denise Levine, former director of the Junior High School Writing and Learning Project, and Kerry G. Weinbaum, teacher and teacher consultant at IS-115X, are contributors to **Portfolio Grading: Process and Product**, by Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson (Boynton/Cook). Denise co-authored (with Roberta Camp) "Portfolios Evolving: Background and Variations in Sixth-Through Twelfth-Grade Classrooms." Kerry's piece is "Portfolios as a Vehicle for Student Empowerment and Teacher Change."

NYCWP member Mary Otto, who participated in last year's Portfolio Assessment Workshop, led a workshop on "Multiple Responses to Writing" at the March 22 Symposium of the Westchester Council of English Educators. The Symposium's theme was "Assessment and Evaluation in the Literate Environment." Mary's workshop focused on classroom strategies for responding to student writing.

A fond farewell to Lisa Rosenberg, Monroe HS, who has contributed her considerable writing and editing skills to the New York City Writing Project Newsletter for many years and helped to guide it to its current high quality. We'll miss her collaboration in the future.

As the Project grows, the Newsletter grows with it. We've created a new position, Coordinating Editor, which Nancy Wilson will define. Nancy, who currently teaches in and coordinates the alternative GED program at Lehman, is co-author with Sondra Perl of **Through Teacher's Eyes: Portraits of Writing Teachers at Work**.

Also to join the editorial staff, Marion Halberg, Brandeis HS, ESL teacher, who has been a teacher-consultant and active project member for several years.

The NYC Writing Project was proud to present, "Live from the Bronx ... The 1991 Summer Institutes!" Nick D'Allesandro and Candy Systra taught the Open Institute; Ronni Tobman-Michelen and Robin Cohen taught the Writing Teachers Consortium (WTC); Gail Kleiner and Ed Osterman taught the Advanced WTC; Karen Griswold and Lena Townsend will be teaching the Adult Educators Institute; Linette Moorman and Linda Vereline taught the Advanced Junior High School course; and Elaine Avidon, Barbara Batton and Bruce Kanze coordinated the new Elementary Teachers Network.

Elaine Avidon and Candy Systra coordinated the Teacher Consultant Training Course this year. They report that participants Sharon Holleman, Sam Intrator, Kathleen Jensen, Bobbi Matzner, Gaynor McCown, Patricia Peacock, Sharon Rosenberg, Benyonne Schartz, Alan Stein, Jocelyne Tord and Claudette Webster worked their pens off in the course.

Carla Asher will be on leave as Director of the Writing Project for part of next year to participate in a program for public administrators at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Carla's article, "Writing On Your Own: It's Lighter on You" appeared in the spring issue of *The Quarterly* of the National Writing Project and the Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy.

Teachers representing Writing Projects from around the country met here in New York City on Saturday, May 18, 1991 to consider two basic questions: What are the urban issues Writing Projects in cities need to address? How does an urban Writing Project address urban issues in its model of training and in the classrooms of its teacher-consultants? Participants came to this meeting of the Urban Sites Network from Boston, Buffalo, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Houston, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco. Carla Asher and Richard Sterling ran the meeting with assistance from Elaine Avidon. Also representing New York were Paul Allison, Nick D'Alessandro, Melanie Hammer, Linette Moorman, Ed Osterman, and Marcie Wolfe. Two of our teacher-consultants made presentations, Paul on some of the assessment work he's developing with colleagues at University Heights HS, and Nick on how we're addressing urban issues in our summer institutes. We all left with some answers and many more questions.

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