

New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

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A Note From the Editors

This issue focuses on our experiences as teachers in the New York City public school system. As we were putting the issue together, we began to worry about its pessimistic tone. It's not often easy to be upbeat when talking and writing about how the school system impacts on our teaching.

There's plenty to be upset about: from metal detectors at some entrances of our high schools to being forced by the union to choose between give-backs and lay-offs, and from having to do lunchroom patrol during our *professional* periods to feeling isolated in our classrooms. But we don't want this issue to be merely another complaint. Rather we offer these descriptions of "the system" as problem-posing inquiries.

In these articles you will find stories of frustrated possibility, but we think that the possibilities are as evident as are the frustrations. Chris Kissack leads us off with evidence from her teacher-research that new teachers quickly lose their ideals in the difficult schools where they work, but she describes a vision for teaching that might just prevent such losses. Gail Kleiner and Ronni Michelen give us two sides of a coin. Gail has just returned to teaching in a public high school, and she gives us her mixed reviews. Ronni, on the other hand, has found a new love for teaching at Lehman College, after many years as a high school teacher. The book reviews which follow these articles also focus on the theme of teaching in New York City public schools. Marsha Slater and Jocelyne Tord give us two views of Samuel G. Freedman's book, *Small Victories*.

Of course, we've also included some positive stories. Bryna Diamond has collected them in "Steal These Ideas," and Sondra Perl shows us the insides of the Writing Teachers Consortium in "From a Teacher's Journal." Finally, there's Chico Chichester's story about success in overcoming early obstacles.

These articles and stories do not present a complete picture. We know that some teachers have found ways to make the system work for them or have created alternatives for themselves and their students within the system.

We'd like to publish those stories in a future issue of the Newsletter. If this is an issue focused on problem-posing, in a future issue we'll highlight your stories of problem-solving.

Testing the Limits

Christine Kissack gave this speech on Saturday, April 28, 1990, at the "Teacher to Teacher Conference," sponsored by the New York City Writing Project. As Chris said in her speech, the conference was "a model of one way that teachers can encourage and support each other in their efforts to change their teaching." Many of us left Lehman that day feeling revitalized, inspired, and challenged by our peers. This address continues to remind us of how hard we have to work to hold onto those original ideals that led many of us to become teachers. To stay faithful to those ideals, Chris told us, "We need a vision." This is hers.

When the committee that organized this conference asked if I would give this opening talk, my first question was, why me? They explained that this was a conference of other teachers teaching teachers and that they didn't want to bring in an *expert* to speak. Since I've taught high school and junior high school, worked as a consultant, tried a little teacher-research and even have two children in NYC public schools, they couldn't think of anyone else who was not an expert in so many different areas.

I'd like to look at some questions about teacher change. In what ways do we change as we continue teaching? What factors affect the direction we take? What supports a teacher's effort to change her thinking, her classroom, her school? Why is change essential? What gets in the way?

During a sabbatical two years ago I participated in the Project's Classroom Researcher project where I began a research project. I interviewed five new teachers who had been teaching for less than two years in Bronx high schools. I was interested in how new teachers were getting along these days. Even though I've been teaching for almost 18 years now, the memory of those first difficult and exhausting years hasn't faded. I still remember taking afternoon naps when I got home. Don't you?

One of the things I was curious about was why people were going into teaching. Starting salaries are more competitive now; there are those long vacations, but is there anything else?

I became a teacher in the early 70's, straight out of college and the anti-Vietnam War movement. I was involved in left-wing politics. I wanted to help change the world and working

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with young people seemed a good place to start. I think many of us entered the profession for those reasons. I wondered if new teachers still had a vision about that, if they saw themselves as agents for change.

Well, the good news is that I believe they do, at least the five teachers I spoke to all expressed the desire to make a difference.

This is Joe:

Being before or being responsible for the education of some 80 plus students, and the fact that you're a positive role model, that you're not much older than them, I think that's a very fine display. It's very, it's inspiring for me that I can be a positive influence on a life. I thought maybe by coming into teaching I could help make a change.

Joe came into teaching with a vision of what teaching should be, of what a teacher could do. That's the good news.

The bad news. I saw how these teachers had begun to change, to lose this vision in a very short time.

This is Joe again:

My philosophy right now on education and teaching is that as long as I'm here everyday and not late, and I'm standing before a class and have an aim and a "do-now," regardless of what goes down, you know, not to measure how much they learn or what they learn, but as long as I'm able to appear with my head on my shoulders and I know what's happening and taking the attendance everyday. That is it.

Joe was teaching in what is considered one of the better academic high schools in the Bronx. So what happened? Lots

of things. We all know the kinds of problems teachers face. Put in a difficult situation (and all of these new teachers were put in difficult situations) with few resources and little support, new teachers--any teachers--will begin to change what they believe about themselves, about their role as teachers, about their students and about education in general. When things are falling down around you, most of us have to try to make sense of what's happening. Teachers have a limited number of choices. We can blame ourselves. We can blame our students. Or we can blame the system. Many of us choose without ever realizing it.

There was something else that I noticed as I listened to these new teachers. I noticed the ways in which I had changed over the years. Seeing through their eyes, I began to feel their shock and dismay over situations that I had become used to, that I had learned to accept as normal.

Here's a small example. All five teachers were upset by the lack of contact they had with their principals.

Upon entering high school a new teacher is frequently met first by the principal. Though the principal is the head of the school and designated its educational leader, for most of these five teachers contact was limited to this initial meeting and the one required observation in which the principal observes a class being taught.

Rocco first met his principal at a gathering for new teachers organized by the home economics department. "The principal was part of it but it was basically attended by the new teachers." Rocco found the principal "pleasant" if not helpful.

The last time I was observed he got there on time and stayed there for about fifteen minutes (out of a 40 minute class), told me what a good job I was doing, and left . . . But you know, he hasn't been against me, you know, but, I mean we haven't sat down and talked even twenty or thirty minutes about problems.

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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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Eve had even less contact with her principal. She was called down to the principal's office at the end of her first day working as a substitute in the math department and was offered a regular position in the nursing department. Other than one classroom observation she had no other contact. "Just the first day when she offered me the position and then once when she observed me. That was all."

Inez had experience with two different principals. She spent one term teaching at Evander Childs HS, then because of a cut in the teacher allocation she was sent to Adlai Stevenson HS. She found neither principal useful to her as a new teacher.

If anything, they stayed away from me a great deal. When I was at Evander, the principal there, he never came to my classroom to observe me or anything. . . . At Smith I only met with the principal when I first came in because they really wanted me there. They really wanted somebody with a background in math. Somebody that showed some confidence in how to deal with kids.

Her only other contact with the principal at Smith was one that she initiated. After an incident in which she found a student in her classroom with a knife, Inez approached the principal.

So I spoke to the principal and I say, "You know I don't feel safe in that class and this kid doesn't seem to be happy with me . . . I want to see what you're going to do. I don't want him in the classroom. Something has to be done with him. He should be suspended or something. He [the principal] says, "Those kids are not dangerous. I think you're making this up. You're fantasizing. . . ." So that was the last time I spoke with him. He never came to observe me.

Neither Joe nor Karen felt that their principals took any personal interest in them. Joe remembers his class observation.

I was observed by the principal last term and he really liked the lesson . . . and he assured me that it seems like I'm born for a teacher. You know, you have the art, all you need now is the science. Time management. But the way I feel about it, I don't really think deep down inside anyone really cares. I mean, that's just the view I've been getting.

When it comes to the principal, Joe basically feels anonymous. "Yeah, like when he'll see me he says like 'Hi, guy.' But I don't even--I don't know if he knows my name."

Karen, like Inez, was cut from her first teaching position, "excessed" due to a decrease in student population. It was only at that time that she had real contact with the principal.

I had contact with him when I found out that I was going to be excessed. . . . So I went to him and I said to him, "You know, I'm leaving now. I'm sorry to be leaving, I really enjoyed it here."

And his response was "Oh, you are?" And he seemed surprised. And he said, "Well, I'll talk to so and so about this." But I don't think he ever did.

Karen tries to understand why she, too, was anonymous.

I tried to get involved with student activities. I used to go to school dances and games and stuff. And he [the principal] was always there. He's a brand new principal and so he was trying to make a good impression--he was always there. So I'd bump into him. But I guess I didn't leave an impression on him.

When I read these pieces to the other people in my teacher-research course, all of us experienced teachers had pretty much the same reaction. What did they expect? That's the way principals are. You can't expect them to really know their staff, especially in large urban high schools. But the point is, of course, that we should expect more. These teachers did at one time. Maybe we also did.

And if what we expect, what we know to be right is impossible in a given situation, then the situation has to change, not our expectations. We can't accept something that we know doesn't work or is not right just because we've gotten used to it or we haven't yet figured out anything better.

So far the *teacher change* that I've talked about has been change for the worse. I've told stories about giving up on beliefs, accepting what was once unacceptable. But we all want to change and grow in positive ways.

I believe that change is inevitable. I think that we are constantly changing, defining ourselves as teachers, although not always consciously. We change in our relations to administrators, fellow teachers, parents, and privately in our relations to our students. It is the attitude we take toward students that is primary. Do we see our students as more like us than unlike us despite the differences in age, race or culture that might exist? Are we moving toward students as allies, as partners in a learning community with the respect which that attitude demands, or are we backing away, distancing ourselves, blaming them for a system's failures? If we don't believe that schools can be more than educational slums then we too are forced to live in a ghetto. If we diminish the potential of our students, then we are also diminished.

We need a vision. This is a sentence that's easy to say, but very hard to keep. There are a lot of forces at work, pressures on us to maintain the status quo in our schools. It is all too easy to drown in the tide of cynicism that engulfs our schools, a cynicism that is often powered by racism. As one of my new teachers said, "That's the way it is. I'm just going to follow with the game and just do the best I can within the limits of what they are giving me." It's hard to resist, but I think we have to challenge those limits.

What I find I need, what I think we all need, is a vision. We need a model of what education should and must be. For me this model is not unconnected to what I want for society in general. I think these three principles make for a good start:

- 1) Equity for all members of the community regardless of class, race, religion or gender.
- 2) Shared power and participatory decision-making.

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3) Collective responsibility for the welfare of each of us.

It may sound like I'm no longer talking about education, about teaching, but I'm actually proposing that we look at our classrooms, our schools and our school systems in the light of these ideas.

Is there equity in our classroom? Our schools? What does that mean? Is there participation in decision-making by all (not by paper committees), but by students, parents, school workers and administrators, in matters of curriculum as well as regarding rules and procedures that affect our school lives? How would that work? Do we feel and act on a sense of collective responsibility for each others' welfare in our classrooms, in our schools? If not, what is preventing it? What must be changed?

By having some model, some goals, we can begin to really evaluate what is happening in our classrooms and involve students in that evaluation.

After all, teaching is not just a collection of techniques or methods. We've all heard of teachers who use journal writing as punishment. You know, those wonderful sentence starters on the outside of Title I folders, while inside the folder is stuffed with work sheets. Someone's missing the point. The techniques that many Writing Project teachers employ are only the tools we use to create and bring to life our vision of what education can be. We must hold that model in our minds, in our hearts, and in our guts.

I don't mean to say the model is something fixed. It changes. The vision becomes clearer in the doing, and as we open up to students they can and must contribute their visions. We can then begin to look at our practice to see how it supports or undermines the learning environment we're trying to create.

I went through a period of time in my own teaching when I essentially decided to close any classroom door to the outside world. I would tape construction paper over the windows and just do my own thing.

It didn't work. Students bring into the room everything they've experienced on the outside. We have metal detectors at Evander Childs HS. For those of you who don't know, these are not the kind of gates you just walk through at an airport. Once a week, on random days, a squad of 30 or so security guards enter Evander and set up chain link fences to form aisles in the vestibule of the main entrance. As they enter school on these mornings, students are randomly chosen (about one out of every five) and directed to tables where two guards use hand-held metal detectors to search them for weapons. The students must empty the contents of their pockets onto a tray which they then hold out in front of them. One guard runs the detector up and down, from head to toe about two inches from the student's body. Another guard uses a second detector to search through the student's book bag or pocketbook. This is what has become known as *wanding* in my school.

No one would disagree that weapons can't be tolerated in schools, in part because weapons are most often used by students against other students and we are all entitled to a safe edu-

tional environment. But the way this has been instituted is a clear violation. Everyone (all students that is; teachers are not searched) is presumed guilty, and outside forces are brought in to address an internal problem. Where is the equity here? What happened to shared decision-making? In such an atmosphere, how can we build in students a sense of community where people look out for each other?

How do I say good morning to students on these days of *wanding*? "Welcome to class?" They walk in angry, or worse, completely passive. They're getting used to it. Line up; open your bag; empty your pockets; hands out in front of you. This is the day's most powerful lesson. Whatever happens in the classroom pales next to their experiences of just coming into the building.

Just as students are affected by what happens to them outside of the classroom, teachers can't remain in isolation, each in his or her own classroom. We need to be supported in our efforts to make progressive changes in our teaching.

We've been trying at Evander, through the foundation of a writing committee, to do just that. With support from the Writing Project, thirteen of us meet weekly for two hours. We have some shared vision of what teaching should be, though we argue, complain, advise and encourage each other a lot.

We're trying to support each other, defining, then acting to remove some of the obstacles that prevent us from moving in ways that we believe to be important. So much is beyond our control at this point, like class size or getting rid of the metal detectors. But we're doing some things. We support each other in the classroom and we're committed to keeping the group going.

But I realize the limits of a group like ours, and there are consequences when any group attempts significant change. When we begin to think and talk about changes that question the distribution of power, when we challenge that power, there are consequences.

Just last term I learned first-hand about the consequences of going too far, or pushing the limits of acceptable teacher involvement. Teachers at Evander are urged by the administration to be concerned about their students and to help them with problems that interfere with their ability to learn. When Alberth, one of my ESL students, started having attendance problems, I spoke to him to find out what was wrong. Alberth told me that he had been kicked out of his sister's apartment by her crack-addicted husband, had found a room in a South Bronx tenement, and after paying his rent, had little money left over for food from his part-time job in Woolworth's.

I spoke to my A.P. and the bi-lingual guidance counselor. Within a few days Alberth received free breakfast and lunch tickets, a transportation pass, and the names of some Spanish-speaking families who might be willing to rent him a room. My interest and concern was applauded. Everyone felt good.

A few weeks later Alberth was absent again. After three days I received a notice from the dean's office that he had been suspended. He had been caught by the metal detectors with a knife which he had started carrying after being mugged for the third time as he travelled to the South Bronx on his way home from work.

Once again I went to my A.P. and the guidance department. This time my interest was not so welcome. I was told that this matter was no longer my concern, that I should concentrate on what went on in my classroom, that I was only a teacher.

Alberth did not return to my class. He never showed up at the Board of Education suspense hearing in Brooklyn. Whether he was humiliated, afraid, or just didn't understand what was happening, I don't know. But I do know that we lost him.

I used to think that the system wanted cynical, racist teachers, who did not essentially care about students. How else could I explain all the barriers that exist to real student-centered learning? But I'm beginning to think that it is more complex.

It only makes sense that any principal, any school system, wants dedicated, hard-working teachers who care about students. They would encourage teachers to try to make schools more effective places to learn, but there is a limit, a line. When students and teachers begin to move beyond acceptable participation, when they want to do more than participate in the system that already exists, when they want to question and change some basic assumption that the system is built on, then there are consequences. Then we've gone too far. There's an interesting article in the April 1990 issue of *Language Arts* by Mark Clarke, in which he asks if teachers can take the heat.

Do we back off of our commitments to the empowerment of students when their actions put us in conflict with colleagues and superiors, or do we challenge the system to deliver on the promise of liberation education?

I want to end by asking us to look at ourselves as an organization, to look at the Writing Project which has brought us all here.

I think our Project must do more than support teacher change; it must become an agent for change. As an organization we face the challenge of changing and growing so that we can continue to be useful to teachers and their students.

Look around. Do we reflect the changes in the teaching body? Where are the young teachers? The African-American and Latino teachers? The men?

How do we continue to be a relevant organization? Do we, as a group, share some vision? Can we articulate some of the ideas that we agree upon about teaching, about schools--ideas about equity, education as liberation, opposition to racism and sexism, multicultural education?

There has been in the past a debate about this in the Project. There is a fear that we limit ourselves, turn people away by making statements about what we believe. I think that we will continue to grow and be useful only if we attempt to address the burning educational issues that face us.

We must decide what these issues are. We must decide what we believe and can agree upon and we must decide what we can do, both as a group and as individuals.

To quote Samuel Betances, "Let us be part of those things which liberate, not part of those things which dominate."

—Christine Kissack
Evander Childs HS

What a Classroom Should Be

After a sabbatical and a child care leave from Adlai Stevenson HS in the Bronx, Ronni Michelen returned to teaching this fall as an adjunct lecturer at Lehman College. In this article, she describes what it's been like for her to teach outside the Board of Education system.

Love of teaching never leaves a person. My three years away from a high school classroom feel like a very long time. I miss the excitement of a good lesson and watching students read and write and learn, but I remember too well the five classes, the forty-two minute periods, greeting 150 students, the coverages, the three preps, the papers, the cafeteria duty, the homeroom, the anxiety, the frustration. I miss full-time teaching, but I don't miss teaching in a system that too often doesn't help us to help our students become competent readers, writers or thinkers.

After teaching English at Adlai Stevenson HS in the Bronx for ten years, I took a sabbatical in 1988, followed by a child care leave. During my absence, I've done some substitute teaching and have worked as a research assistant. This September, just as my itch to be back in a classroom grew stronger, I was hired as a part-time adjunct by the Academic Skills Department at Lehman College. This position has given me the opportunity to do some of my best teaching.

My Lehman Academic Skills class met from 11:10 - 1:10 four days a week this fall. We sat in a circle, freewrote, read together, wrote and learned from each other. We heard no bells. My seventeen students called me Ronni. We had the luxury of time, which gave me the invaluable chance to slow down the learning process, to look intimately at texts with students and help them make sense of what they read and wrote. I learned not to rush. This fall, many of my students read an entire novel for the first time in their lives. As I walked out of each session, I had time to reflect on my own teaching and to think about what was and wasn't working. When I had three preps at Stevenson HS I always knew one class was not getting my best thinking. I just couldn't switch gears quickly enough to accommodate so many different needs.

The students in the Academic Skills Program are there because they are not proficient in reading and writing. They are the same students who pass through our high school classrooms, just getting by but not equipped to handle college curricula.

My students ask me how it was possible for them to graduate from high school yet not be competent in reading and writing. They raise an important issue. They have been placed in the Academic Skills Program because they have failed the CUNY reading and writing competency exams. We are told that as adjuncts our goal is not to train these students to take the tests but to help them become better readers and writers and in turn successful students. The students in the program are given three

Classroom. . . *continued from previous page*

semesters to pass the exams. If they don't succeed they can't continue in the program and therefore never reach college status.

The program is structured so that between 12 - 25 students are block-programmed to attend two classes together. There is no set curriculum. I am not told what to cover or how to teach. I am on my own to experiment and to practice my own philosophy of teaching.

We spent the first five weeks of the semester looking at writing by Richard Wright, Richard Rodriguez, Maya Angelou, and Patrick Fenton about their own reading and writing experiences. We responded to the texts in a variety of ways. Then my students wrote about their own reading histories. I watched them move from draft to draft, finding their own voices and discovering that they did have things to say. From this unit I learned that most of my students hate reading and rarely choose to read on their own. To them, reading means being able to answer multiple-choice questions about a timed reading passage. They equate reading with a testing situation in which most of them have performed poorly. Some students are not native speakers of English. Some are poor test-takers whose ability is not reflected on the exams. Others simply cannot become involved in the test passages. And many are slow readers. All these years they wondered what was wrong with reading slowly. They resented being placed in the *green* group instead of the *red* group. Reading meant failure and brought low self-esteem. So they chose not to read. It was important to talk and write about these issues. We were getting somewhere.

I think about how to adapt this unit when I return to a high school classroom. At Lehman, we can wander and stray from our topics and slowly return when the time is right. At Stevenson, I was often pressured by a set curriculum. At Lehman, I could sit with my students, encourage them, offer suggestions, and even help solve romantic dilemmas. Each student understood how to move forward. In the public school system I never had enough time to tell a student how well he/she is doing or what he/she needed to do to be more successful. Comments on papers like "good job" or "I'd like to hear more" often had to suffice. At Stevenson, after teaching five periods, my mind and body usually longed for a nap. Now I am invigorated.

I think about how lucky I am to have this ideal part-time teaching situation. As I drive into the Lehman parking lot, I feel like a professional. There is no junk in my mailbox, no departmental meetings, no petty arguments in teacher workrooms. My students are mature and motivated and we have a bulk of time together. I can choose texts and talk to them about what they are learning and what they would like to learn. I pass through the NYC Writing Project office and talk to colleagues about ideas and problems. I look forward to sitting down and planning.

Given the structure of the course, my class has time to meet in writing groups, share logs and double entry journals, write and listen to each other's dialogues, use the computer room, gossip and laugh. As we reflect on the semester, I see change and growth. This is evident in their writing, their responses to reading, and in attitudes toward themselves. What more can a

teacher hope for? The rewards are clear.

I have had many wonderful classes in high school. I recall read-arounds and struggles and victories. But often, I questioned myself. What am I teaching? What is it I want students to learn? Why must I use this book in my classroom and how will I get them to read it and love it?

This teaching experience has given me the chance not only to grow and learn on a professional level by experimenting with several new learning strategies and deepening others, but also by feeling that I have affected the academic lives of the seventeen students I shared a classroom with. We became a community.

Often at the end of a semester, I ask myself what did my students come away with? I think about how I didn't do enough of this and I should have done more of that. This time, I am already thinking of the spring semester and what books I will use. I think about what my students taught me this term. As an English teacher, I always had the notion that my role was to bring fiction into the classroom. But my students taught me that what really interests them are the stories of other peoples' lives. They will always remember Richard Rodriguez's feelings about language, Richard Wright's experience with reading, and Okonkwo's story in the novel *Things Fall Apart*. These young people want to look at other peoples' lives and experience, question, analyze and appreciate them. This is what has meaning.

My return to a high school classroom is inevitable. There is part of me that looks forward to the challenge and the chaos. I miss not running into students and teachers in the hallways. But being away from the system has also reinforced what I already know doesn't work--the crowded classrooms, time constraints, the importance placed on passing RCT's, inadequate textbooks, and so many other impediments that discourage learning. Teachers need to breathe fresh air but we are rarely given the opportunity. I grow anxious about returning to Stevenson, a place I once thought of as home.

As I enter my classroom at Lehman, some students are already freewriting while others discuss their previous class. I join the circle and am anxious to get started. I have no Delaney cards to mark up, no one to reprimand. I watch Suzy who will write five drafts of a piece until she is satisfied. And Melissa, who many of the students turn to when they need help with their writing. And Regan and Kathy and Amy who have formed their own small group to share writing homework. Juan and Tony discuss the concept of tradition in the novel *Things Fall Apart*. I sit back and smile, knowing this is what a classroom should be about.

—Ronni Michelen
Lehman College

Going Home Again

This year, Gail Kleiner moved in an opposite direction to Ronni Michelen. After several years on the staff of the Institute for Literacy Studies, this fall Gail returned to a position as a full-time high school teacher. In "Going Home Again" she describes what her first term back has been like.

When I returned to full-time teaching in a high school this fall after having worked full-time for the Writing Project for four years, I knew I was in for a big change. I had grown accustomed to working in an environment where my work was valued, where the work of my colleagues was inspirational and helpful to my own, where my schedule was self-determined and, most notably, where there existed a professional environment where staff shared the belief that the work we were doing was meaningful and important. From my seven years previous experience working in a New York City high school, I knew schools were no such places; cynicism prevails, bells rule your life, and teachers have very little say in establishing policies that very much affect their working lives.

And yet, I needed to return to a school. The work I was doing was beginning to feel too removed from the real places where learning and teaching occur and I missed the urgency, the energy of kids and schools.

I returned to my old school for a few reasons. Jane Addams HS had been good to me; I liked many of the teachers, I had a chairperson I respected and I was already somewhat established there. I liked that comfort. I was also encouraged by the fact that Addams had voted in school-based management and had a new principal who seemed creative and oriented towards change.

The teaching has been wonderful. I don't mean that it's been easy or that I'm completely satisfied with my own work. I've discarded a lot of what I used to do and starting again has been difficult. Also, my expectations, having spent four luxurious years imagining active, engaged, critical classrooms, are high and hard to meet. But on many days I am exhilarated by my students' efforts and accomplishments. I have four ninth-grade classes full of kids who have begun to see reading, writing and thinking as meaningful, real activities, done for themselves and not for me. I have classes full of students who have come to trust their classmates enough to share their writing and their lives. I have classes full of students who are thrilled by their own developing abilities. I am more convinced than ever that a great deal is possible in urban classrooms, even when kids are underprepared for high school work, even when their lives are complicated and full of other demands.

But there is a limit to what I can do in my individual

classroom. As I begin planning for next term, I realize how much my choices are limited by the school structure as it presently exists. Jane Addams is a vocational school; incoming students are programmed into houses by trade, and my students, with whom I will continue to work in the spring, have all chosen "health careers." I would like to use our English class to explore issues in their chosen field. I imagine starting off by reading and talking broadly about issues in health care in New York and beyond, waiting to see what areas seem most compelling to each class. I have been collecting articles for months and I've been listening for information from students about their assumptions, attitudes and interests related to health and health care. A few weeks ago, when we were talking about a character in a novel we were reading who died of breast cancer, I was struck by their curiosity about the facts of the disease as well as about the fact of unequal access to quality health care. Since many students envision working in hospitals or other health care facilities, I would also like our exploration to take us outside the school building to see and talk to real doctors, technicians, nurses, to find out about their work as well as some of their concerns about AIDS, their own working conditions, or some of the ethical questions involved in what they do.

But I will be teaching five classes. I will have to make many compromises in this plan. Probably I will limit our inquiry to texts that follow a plan that I determine beforehand rather than allow their interests to guide our direction. Or, I will choose one class to do more extended work with and teach the others more traditionally. So although some wonderful things happen in my classroom, there are many more experiences my students won't have until there is some flexibility in the forty-minute period and the five-class load of their teachers.

In addition to my classes, non-teaching responsibilities inhibit my thinking about what happens inside my classroom. After teaching two classes in a row--during what would be a perfect opportunity to think about those two classes, to attend to individual kids who I've noticed need help, to meet with a colleague to plan a project--I have cafeteria duty. I'm far

After my morning classes I'm excited and enthusiastic, full of the kids and full of ideas . . . But by the time I'm finished being a police-woman for forty-two minutes, I have lost that energy; the ideas flowing from my teaching are cut off, and I'm feeling tired and defeated.

from the only teacher in the system with this kind of building assignment, but it's still worth mentioning. Although my colleague and I who are assigned to this patrol have made it as pleasant as possible by getting to know a lot of the kids who eat lunch fifth period and setting up a reasonable routine for giving passes, etc., I still resent being there every single day. After my morning classes I'm excited and enthusiastic, full of the kids and full of ideas that have been generated during my time in class. I need to write some of this down. I need to run after a kid to make sure she knows how much she contributed to class. I need to hang up the wonderful poems the kids have written so others

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in the school can see them. But by the time I'm finished being a policewoman for forty-two minutes, I have lost that energy; the ideas flowing from my teaching are cut off, and I'm feeling tired and defeated.

There are other problems. Many students need more attention than I can give them. As a classroom teacher, I try to watch individual kids--to notice their progress and their problems, both intellectual and emotional. I have the opportunity to observe them in class, to read their work, and to notice changes over time. But kids get lost. I miss the signs, or even if I see them, I don't have time to help them. Too often, follow-up of my observations becomes the responsibility of guidance counselors who, although well-intentioned, have huge caseloads and do not have daily contact with kids.

One student, a quiet boy named Miguel, can hardly read or write. He never participates in class and looks lost. On the few occasions when he does do written work, I find it almost unintelligible. When I realized how much trouble Miguel was having, I referred him to his guidance counselor, who programmed him for a reading lab (which he should have had in the first place) for remediation. He never went. In later conversations with the counselor I discovered that Miguel is passing all his other classes (I can't even begin to imagine how) although just barely, and the school is going to let him finish out the term as is. I feel guilty about Miguel. He definitely can learn. I just haven't had the time or patience to attend to his very special needs. It took me a little too long to realize the trouble he was in and to devise ways to include him in class and help him individually as well.

And then there's Joeann, who is not as sweet as Miguel, but is in just as much trouble. Early in the term she wrote about finding her stepfather shooting up in the bathroom. Although this was brave of her to do, and deeply disturbing to me, even more disturbing was her distance from it, her seeming unawareness of the impact it had on her or that it would have on others reading it. Joeann happens to be in a class of lively, verbal students. She started to fall behind, miss class often. I noticed her in the halls all through the day, even on days when she hadn't attended my class. I spoke to her a few times and wrote letters to her guidance counselor. I worry about Joeann and can't help feeling that with better communication, or more shared responsibility between teachers and counselors, there's more that could be done.

While I was working at the Project, I was immersed in conversation about innovative ways to make learning connected to kids' real interests and needs. I read about teachers from around the country who were rethinking their curriculum, their classrooms. I imagined schools that experimented with alternative structures to the school day, that attempted to break down divisions between disciplines, and that actively sought more

parent and community involvement. Surrounded by like-minded colleagues, I was hopeful about what schools could be.

Now, I am continually struck by how deeply embedded and accepted certain assumptions about teaching and learning are, even when they're being openly challenged in educational journals and at conferences around the country. Early in the term, at an English department meeting, a teacher brought up the stigma that students in his "p" (remedial) classes feel because of the designation. He wondered if we couldn't change the "p," making it less obvious that these are slow classes. I thought this man might have been raising the question of whether having tracked classes was a good idea in the first place. I had just finished reading a convincing article against tracking in "Rethinking Schools," a newsletter put out by teachers in Milwaukee and would have welcomed a discussion. This is just the kind of conversation I was beginning to feel uncomfortable having as an outsider to a school. How did I know what was possible, or desirable if I wasn't actually teaching the kids, involved in the day-to-day life of the school? Now that I feel comfortable

making informed contributions about pressing educational issues, there is no forum. I have mixed feelings about heterogeneously-grouped classes--my ability to deal with students like Miguel is one of my concerns--even though I believe that the

I miss the conversations . . . the shared belief that public schools in New York City can be much more than they presently are . . .

notion is educationally sound. I could perhaps be convinced that we should have an honors track for particularly bright and ambitious kids, but we never had the conversation. Instead, the consensus seemed to be that slow kids need to know they're slow so they can improve themselves. What about the kid who didn't sleep the night before the DRP test, which is after all the only measure that assigns kids to different levels of classes? What about the fact that kids in slow classes keep getting "taught" basic skills and never have the opportunity to participate in more meaningful learning? This meeting was very discouraging to me. We sat in a computer room, hardly able to see each other. There was never any real intention to talk about our common work.

I miss the conversations. And the shared belief that public schools in New York City can be much more than they presently are. I miss the seriousness of my colleagues at the Writing Project, their willingness to acknowledge the social and political dimensions of education in this city. I miss the spirit of inquiry, of continuous learning that characterized so much of our work. How will I reconcile these losses with how much I love working directly with kids, with my belief that change will have to come from within individual schools? How long can I stand the isolation? Can I continue my own learning while so deeply immersed in the regimented school day?

At this point, I really don't know.

—Gail Kleiner
Jane Addams HS

Book Reviews

Two Views of Small Victories

Two Project members, Marsha Slater and Jocelyne Tord, read Samuel Freedman's *Small Victories* (Harper & Row, 1990) this fall and agreed to put their responses in writing for the Newsletter. *Small Victories* is an account of one year at Seward Park HS in Manhattan with a particular emphasis on the struggles of an English teacher, Jessica Siegel, to make a difference in the lives of her students. Jocelyne finds the story of Jessica Siegel "renewing," while Marsha finds herself wanting to be different from Jessica. We encourage you to read the book and see where you stand.

A recent mail brought a request from my alma mater that I include them in my estate planning. An even more recent mail brought a letter from a former student expressing her gratitude for the help I had given during her difficult and stormy adolescence. Legacies, I thought. I have been thinking about legacies quite often as I have been reading *Small Victories: The Real World of a Teacher, Her Students & Their High School* by Samuel Freedman. This is in fact more than the story of one teacher. It is, in a way, the story of many teachers, for Jessica Siegel is the kind of teacher who devotes much of her energies and soul to her work. She is a powerful force in the lives of many of her students. Driving them to college interviews in New Paltz, baking cakes for their early morning newspaper staff meetings, responding to their writing at home late into the night, she is at once the heroine of the story, the princess of the fairytale, and not destined to live happily ever after in her classroom.

Samuel Freedman, a former *New York Times* reporter, has etched a bittersweet picture of this school in which he spent a year. He views with a jaundiced eye the cumbersome bureaucracy of the Board of Education which does its best to discourage teachers from feeling welcome into the teaching profession. He points with acidic wit to the many trials one teacher must undergo to attain an appointed teaching position in the school where he is already a member of the staff. He intersperses historical perspective with individual portraits, straddling continents and cultures as he introduces us to the cast of characters. The students, the lessons in Jessica's classrooms (she travels with her supplies in a shopping bag from room to room throughout the day), the 7:30 AM newspaper sessions, crackle with life. Jessica is a born teacher. She knows how to ask the questions that get to the essence of the lesson. She urges her students to think, to make associations and leaps of understanding. She pushes them to write. She spends many hours responding to their writing in her true voice. They know who she is. She knows who they are. These are no "small victories." These are consummations devoutly to be wished.

The boldly-etched portraits Mr. Freedman has drawn seem

almost as if they were intended for the camera. There is sometimes an almost-heard narrator from a 1940's newsreel filling out the portrait with sonorous tones. But there is great admiration and affection too. Jessica has strong feelings towards her colleagues as well as towards her students. Staff and students are well treated in this book. It is a highly significant year we spend at Seward Park High School and the decision Jessica makes at the end of the year to leave teaching comes as no real surprise. It is renewing to meet Jessica in these pages. Some of us are lucky to work with Jessicas in our own schools. Some of us are Jessicas. Her legacies to her students are the faith they develop in themselves and the courage they saw in her. She helped them learn how to learn. There are few greater legacies.

—Jocelyne Tord
JHS 167 Manhattan

Samuel G. Freedman did his homework. *Small Victories* is an accurate participant-observer's portrait of one year in the life of a New York City public high school teacher, Jessica Siegel, and her school, Seward Park. As I read this book, I wrote *Yes* in the margin each time Freedman hit upon telling details of a teacher's life: the lack of space in which to work with students; finagling to outwit the Bureau of Supplies; the 140 students a day in five classes; the 70 papers a night an English teacher reads; the comments students make to teachers ("If you're so smart, why are you teaching here?"); the lives children lead beyond the classroom walls; teachers fighting with each other over how to spend money that doesn't stretch far enough to fulfill all their professional needs; helping immigrant students pass a writing test in English to qualify for graduation; the Board of Education hiring hall for teachers; not being able to make long distance calls to a college admissions office.

For counterpoint, he effectively weaves in the relevant history of NYC public schools and their immigrant populations, proving that even the good old days of public education weren't halcyon.

But he also interjects his political views in his overt comments about events as well as by what he chooses to report. He says in his introduction that he "resolved to find out how a school . . . struggled with its massive challenges, both inherent and inherited." Unfortunately, he shows us that struggle only through the lives of its casualties.

He chooses the subjects of his reportage so that we become angry with the system that gives people so few options. They become the token symbols for the system's problems. Freedman gives us Darnell Reese as the homeless student with family problems; Harriet Stein as the floundering new teacher in need of mentoring, facing the realities of an inner city school; Carlos Pimentel as the immigrant student whose parents' American

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dream ironically leads to his involvement with the drug trade; John McNamara as the teacher who works a second job as a maitre d' at a wedding caterer's just to help his young family survive financially, performing services for free at Seward Park that teachers in private schools are paid to do.

And we have Jessica Siegel, an English teacher, as the burned-out champion of children who has no time for a life outside of school. Freedman writes that "the question is not whether teaching gives her a sense of worth, of value, of importance. Of course it does. The question is the price she pays." When Jessica quits at the end of the year, she does so because she "doesn't have a life" and realizes she can't have one if she continues to teach the way she knows she can and must. In order to be "part of something," Freedman makes the reader ask, does a teacher have to give up everything else? Is it possible to make the system work for administrators, teachers and kids?

At one point he describes her as a "benign Frankenstein, nourishing to students and colleagues, damaging only herself." She, herself, cites two of her role models and wonders how they manage to nourish and sustain themselves in the face of what she faces. She hasn't a clue. But we must.

Jessica allows the system to exploit her. She continues to publish the school newspaper without compensatory teaching time off to do it, and the powers that be who could grant that time know that she will continue to do it, "even if the effort sent her home exhausted and tearful." The dedication of teachers like Jessica is at the crux of why we still teach in converted toilets: we are willing to work against insuperable odds and we can survive. At least for a while.

I want to try to be like her, only different: I want to be a survivor. I want to thrive. In order to make the system work for ourselves and our students, we need to create the balance Jessica couldn't. We need to teach in such a way that our students share in the responsibility for their learning; we must learn to say "No" when it is impossible to do what is needed with the resources at hand and to become effective in obtaining the monetary and administrative support our efforts demand. We need to nourish ourselves as well as our students or we will not be able to continue to nourish them.

—Marsha S. Slater
International High School

Steal These Ideas

"We've . . . Got the power!" We collaborate. Show videos. Buy books for our students. Despite the issues that are raised in this issue--overwhelming bureaucracy, overstuffed classes, amongst other concerns--teachers are finding creative ways to work within the system.

Candace Somma, Port Richmond HS, has been struggling to find texts that are meaningful to her high school students. She believes that if kids care about something, they will stop at nothing to find out everything about it. With this in mind, she designed a special English course called "Literature of Psychology." She put together an extensive list of self-help books from which students chose. The first semester, when students wrote their actual essays, she reports, the results were disappointing, a discouraging array of old fashioned book reports. The students didn't seem to be able to draw a connection between their books and their realities. It seemed as though the kids had selected books that did not match their needs or experiences.

The next semester Candace started out asking students to write about how each lesson pertained to their individual experiences. As they became more comfortable with this, she asked them to write about what they thought they need to learn, figure out, conquer, discover, to be happier. Students shared their writing; then she distributed the book list, explaining what each book was about and asking students to check off books that appeared to suit their needs. Students were asked to come back a week later with the appropriate book from the list. She loaned books to some students. They spent some time reading during class so that students would get hooked on their books. During this time they began double-entry logs, with the response column confined to those things that struck some sort of personal chord. There was a lot of positive talk and sharing about the books after class.

The next week, a log on 75 pages of the book was due. Students were encouraged to read selectively, skimming over or even omitting chapters that had no meaning to them. They knew that they didn't have to read the entire book, just the portions that they found interesting. Candace graded, responded to and clarified items and returned the logs right away. One week later, students wrote their essays in class. They consulted their books and their journal entries. They began writing, knowing exactly what the task was--to draw connections between their lives and their reading--and what they wrote was vital and alive. One girl wrote about repairing a damaged relationship with her parents after reading *Making Peace With Your Parents*, and said that her mother was reading it also. Yet another wrote of increased self knowledge after reading *Adult Children of Alcoholics*.

The day after the essays were completed, students spent five minutes writing to prepare to tell the class about what they read. Students were so animated and anxious to share that the process took two days. The students had become experts in a variety of subjects and had a wealth of information to exchange; they were painfully honest. There was a sense of community that hadn't been there before.

* * * * *

NYCWP NEWSLETTER

Rosalie Ingberman, Brooklyn Technical HS, encourages juniors in her government class to explore social issues they feel strongly about and that affect the people of New York City. She groups students into committees of five or six based on their interest in the following problems: the homeless, AIDS, transportation, street crime, drug abuse, and education.

The project began with journal writing about why students selected the problem they chose to work on. The class actively listened. Students also wrote about what they hoped to accomplish in their committees. Later, students wrote about what was going well and what was not going so well in their groups.

Each member of the committee was asked to gather at least six articles from newspapers and magazines. They were asked to develop an analysis or response to each author's ideas using these sentence starters among others: "I don't understand . . .," "I noticed . . .," and "Although it seems . . ." Groups prepared resource packets that included a directory of New York City agencies and organizations, and pamphlets and brochures collected on the subject.

The next step in the project was for groups to visit agencies, resource centers, or volunteer organizations that are involved with their issue. Then at least two members of the committee conducted a tape recorded interview with a staff member. They prepared for their interviews by reading material about the agency beforehand and generating a list of questions which focussed on such topics as funding, New York City laws and policies, who is most affected by the problem, and what is being done to alleviate it.

Each group led a discussion for one class period focussing on the issue they chose to investigate, the results of the interview, and the political action they planned to undertake. The purpose of this presentation was to educate the rest of the class to the causes, effects, and possible solutions that are being explored in New York City. Each group planned a political activity designed to bring about change. Groups organized letter-writing campaigns, and teach-ins, and wrote letters to newspapers. Rosalie met with each group to discuss their action and approve it.

Projects culminated in final essays. Initially, students were asked to write further about their issue and New York City's response to it. The format was revised, though, to answer the following questions:

Ten years from now, what do you think you will remember about the problem you researched? What did you learn about the process of working in groups? Discuss positive and negative reactions and experiences. Discuss any problems you encountered, any successes, any confusions.

Students wrote extensively throughout the project. The process of reading, writing, interviewing and collaborating engaged students throughout.

* * * * *

Teachers are doing it for themselves. Joan Finerman, Alice Joyce, Debra Larkin, and Naomi Shore, Murry Bergtraum HS, are making the system work for them. They requested a common prep period this past term so that they could meet together. In these meetings, they share ideas, resources, problems, and successes. The shared prep has been especially fruitful because they are all teaching mythology, but they've said

that they would value the support and validation even if they didn't have so much in common. All it took, they report, was the cooperation of the Chair of the English Department in advance of programming, and a resolve to meet.

One of the dilemmas that the team has explored is the lack of books in the beginning of the term. The sophomore English teachers began doing personal writing with their classes; this took several incarnations as the teachers drew connections with the upcoming mythology theme. Debra Larkin asked her students to create three-dimensional symbolic representations of themselves. Most students made collages, but many were even more creative. Students made -T-shirts with words and buttons and belts cinching the waist. One student hung ballet slippers from a coat hanger; another brought in a tiny, frilly doll's dress. Another of the teachers had her students create family coats-of-arms; still another asked her students to write about their values.

All four teachers found the collaboration invaluable. Though they met "formally" only once a week, they prepared for their classes together every day. The size of the group, they say, is not important, nor that all involved teach the same subject. This is an opportunity to close the marking book and open a supportive, professional dialogue.

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When Colin Pohl, Bronx Regional HS, teaches "You, the Police and the Law," the theme, "What causes crime?" arises again and again in class. Colin wanted to end the term with some creative and thoughtful writing to pull together ideas about "What causes crime?" without it being a mechanical reprise of the writing that was done throughout the semester. He wanted students to synthesize possible solutions to crime, based on the causes they identified. So he "stole" a video and curriculum idea from the Educational Video Center.

Colin showed a film, "Shotgun," about a young Bronx man who kills two women after his gang rapes them because he's afraid they'll go to the police. The film was a powerful stimulus to discussion, and lent itself to creative, written exploration of the question, "How and why did Shotgun become a violent criminal?" The film was effective because it generated discussion around the theme "What causes crime?" The issues raised were the students' own.

Initially, students responded to the film with free writing. Many wrote at length. The issues that arose in the free writing prompted the direction for further research. Then Colin asked students to write about why Shotgun became a violent criminal. Afterward, they brainstormed ways to confirm their ideas. "How could you further explore this hypothesis? Where could you get the facts to help you prove this?" Colin provided four sources of information, a letter Shotgun wrote while in prison, an interview with the filmmaker, an interview with the Assistant District Attorney, and the New York Times article about the crime and the arrest. Students examined this data for clues that could help explain how and why Shotgun became a criminal. Finally, students wrote about what they discovered about the causes of crime, backing their ideas up with the evidence they collected.

—Bryna Diamond
NYPL Centers for Reading and Writing

From A Teacher's Journal

Sondra Perl has undertaken a research project for the New York City Writing Project. She is conducting an ethnographic study of the work of a Writing Teachers Consortium teacher-consultant. She's focusing particularly on the work done at Monroe HS by Barbara Martz. Sondra is looking at the ways the Project helps teachers change and at what stands in the way of change. Here is a glimpse into her field notes, written "primarily for myself, to capture that first day."

Sept. 5th. It's a sunny morning as I turn onto Westchester Avenue in the Bronx. I'm on my way to visit Monroe High School to study how teachers are being trained to teach writing through the Writing Project's Writing Teachers Consortium, and I note the neighborhood around me: small stores, a bank front now carrying signs for Kentucky Fried Chicken, across the street others announcing hot coffee and donuts. Across from Stern's Shoes, now closed, is a thriving bakery offering pan caliente, older Jewish replaced by newer Hispanic. Away from the El, I make my way to a quiet street of row houses with narrow driveways which face the five-story brick school. As I walk to the entrance, I notice above it etched in granite a quote from William Pitt: *Where Law Ends, Tyranny Begins.*

I wonder about the relationship between law and schooling as I sit in the auditorium listening to the speaker who is addressing the first full faculty meeting of the year. A heavyset man from the School Safety division of the Board of Education is describing the weapon scanner system which is to be introduced at Monroe. "On a random basis," he states, "but at least once a week, forty patrolmen in five vans will arrive at Monroe and set up scanning stations. Teachers are advised to enter the building from a separate door. Anyone found with a weapon will be arrested. Box cutters, the latest weapon in vogue, are not illegal. Last year 2400 weapons were confiscated at 15 schools . . ."

On this day, planned for staff development, Barbara Martz, an on-site teacher-consultant for the WTC, is preparing to give an introductory workshop for teachers who may be interested in taking the course offered at Monroe by the Writing Project. She does not know how many people will attend, whether any of them have had any prior experience with teaching writing or with the Project or whether they will understand why the student samples she has brought to show them are messy. Her workshop is designed to help teachers make connections between writing and learning and to see for themselves how writing can lead to a better and deeper understanding of texts, but such writing, she says to me on the way upstairs, is really for the writers themselves, not the teacher.

We enter Room 319 and Barbara moves the desks and chairs into a large rectangle. The room, though sunny, is bare. Chipped plaster and paint peel off the walls. Yellowed sun-screens hang unevenly over double windows. A sink juts out of one wall. The teachers, however, seem oblivious to their surroundings. Talk is of the school year beginning, too many preps, the filing of grievances and the fact that there are no Delaney cards left in the English office.

As people enter, Barbara glances at the schedule of workshops for the day. Although she managed to secure a double period for her workshop, she is disturbed. She had hoped to catch some of the new teachers and introduce them to this work, but they are scheduled for a mandatory meeting on school safety during this time slot. She makes one of many mental notes: she'll have to locate them herself and talk to them about the course on her own.

During the workshop, the talk is animated. The teachers introduce themselves and explain why they've come. A few joke that Barbara's is the least offensive workshop. Others like to write and hope to learn something more about writing. Most have questions about motivating students to write and, having done that, understanding what it is students have written.

Drawing on what people have said, Barbara makes connections between the kinds of questions they are asking and the kind of writing they assign in their classes which consists mainly of essays or tests. Then, leading them through a series of writing activities, she shows them, specifically, how they can use writing in ways other than as a test of knowledge.

Halfway through the workshop, several teachers jump up. People recognize what is happening and nod understandingly. It's close to 11 and alternate side of the street parking rules change for the day. Some teachers have to move their cars.

Barbara uses the interruption as a break and talk turns more personal. Two teachers next to me discuss Samuel Freedman's *Small Victories*, a journalistic account of the life of an English teacher at Seward Park High School on the Lower East Side. "It's realistic," comments Susan, an experienced English teacher returning after four years' child care leave. "I like it. It shows why young people leave the system. They take it so seriously. I used to be like that," she mused. "I used to love going to work on Monday. Now I'm numb."

During the second half of the workshop, Barbara introduces some reading material and shows teachers how writing about reading can help students better comprehend the texts in front of them.

Towards the end of the session, Manny, an ESL teacher, makes a connection: "I'm realizing that the ideas you have before you read something affect or focus what you read."

Kenny, a special ed teacher, notices his own strategy: "I wrote down a lot of questions about the topic. So when I was reading, I was piecing the questions together and answering them for myself."

Barbara underlines how the kind of writing they've been doing helps a teacher understand who is in the class, to get a picture of what students know and what teachers might have or not have to teach them.

Handing out some samples which show students questioning and wondering, she comments, "It's a way of keeping in touch with what kids are thinking." She encourages people to ask their students to write about subjects before they begin to study them and to have them write continuously as they are reading and talking. And she encourages them to write to her too, to send her notes, to meet with her, to ask questions, to take the course.

—Sondra Perl
Lehman College

Teachers As Writers

Reading is Prohibited

I think that it was shortly after a branch of the Public Library opened in my village, that the conflict between my mother and me came out into the open. In retrospect, it seems clear to me now that my mother and I had been engaged in a mostly wordless, low-intensity struggle for some time previously. Although the main manifestation of this was our differing views of the fact of my reading, there were, also, other areas of disagreement between us. On Saturday mornings, for example, while all the boys my age were in the playground, my mother had me accompany her to the market, first of all; then, when we returned home, I had to help her with all of the housework before I could join my friends. Since these chores were considered *girls work*, my having to do them resulted in unmerciful teasing from my friends. Naturally, this caused me to resent, more and more, being compelled to do them, but I couldn't, at age ten, dream of disobeying my mother.

Also, on many occasions when my friends were out having fun, playing cricket or soccer or raiding people's fruit trees, I had to be at home taking care of my younger brothers. Another *girls job*.

Another source of resentment.

And added to these was the ongoing fact of my mother restricting me from reading anything other than schoolbooks, which, for the most part, I found utterly boring and uninteresting. At that time and place, it wasn't the custom for parents to give children reasons for doing or not doing something, so when she caught me reading (mostly comic books or a meager few others), she would simply seize them.

As can be imagined, this action caused me quite a few problems, since most of the books were borrowed and the owners, naturally, wanted their books back. To avoid detection, my reading habits had to be modified more than slightly. I'd read in school, while going on errands, whether on foot or on my father's bike. And often, in the evenings, while my mother would be preparing dinner in the kitchen, I'd be leaning out of the bedroom window, straining my eyes to take advantage of the waning daylight. I remember that on particular occasions when a book really had me in its tentacles, I'd wake up at night and lie under the sheets reading with the aid of my daddy's flashlight.

The opening of the library gave me entrance to a new and exciting world as a seemingly endless supply of books now became easily available. It also brought a worsening of relations between my mother and me.

Years later, when I was an adult and able to talk to her about her hostility to my reading, she gave several reasons for it. First of all, she felt that all the reading I was doing would only clutter up my mind and prevent me from concentrating on my school-

work; also, my eyes would be irreparably damaged as I was straining them to read by kerosene lamp, candles, and sunlight (which was felt by everyone in the village to be the most damaging of all). In addition, she mentioned that the books would prevent me from doing my household chores. Looking back now with the wisdom of hindsight, I find this last reason especially intriguing, as I'm convinced that mummy really wanted her first child, me, to be a girl, and when she didn't get one until her sixth child, she tried to compensate by forcing me to be in the kitchen with her doing the girl stuff she would have been doing with her daughter. Of course, this theory might be stretching things a bit and my mother denies it (with a smile), but I also remember that after the birth of my third brother, she was crying and lamenting to her friend that it was her fourth child and she still hadn't got the daughter she so badly craved.

After a few weeks of quiet seething at my increased reading, and since she couldn't very well seize and destroy library books, she decreed that I was not to return to the library. This meant that I either had to stop reading or find ways to read without my mother's knowing. I couldn't do the former so I had to resort to the latter. This was not so simple as library books had a hard cover and couldn't be easily concealed under my clothes, so the degree of difficulty had multiplied.

Guyana's

coastland, where the majority of people live, is more than somewhat below sea level and is under constant threat of flooding by the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Since the concrete wall built as a first line of defence has often fallen before the continuous pounding of the relentless sea, Guyanese have had to resort to another means of avoiding the muddy flood waters. Traditionally, houses have been built on posts or *stilts* as I have heard them described by visitors. The height of the houses varies from about three feet to as much as ten feet from the ground. The resulting space is used for social gatherings and children playing, as well as for its original purpose.

Running around the bottom edges of the floor of the house there is, usually, a narrow ledge or shelf. It was this quirk of architectural design that came to my assistance in my efforts to thwart my dearly beloved mother. Exactly how I arrived at this plan, I'm not quite sure now, but it must have been more by accident than any well-conceived design on my part. Anyway, after a few weeks I found myself following a routine. Library days were on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and on the first two days, I'd go to the library, borrow my allotted two books and read for as long as I could there. Fortunately the library was only about three feet off the ground, so before going home, I'd surreptitiously place my books on the shelf under the building. There they would spend the night while I went home innocently

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Writers. . . *continued from previous page*

and library-book free. The next morning, on my way to school, I'd retrieve them, read at every opportunity during the school day, then leave them in school for those nights (Tuesday and Thursday).

I couldn't follow the same strategy on Fridays, as I had to have reading material available to me on Saturdays and Sundays, so Plan B evolved. After leaving the library on Fridays, instead of leaving the books under the building, I used to take them in my school bag, and, depending on the situation when I arrived home, hide them either under our house or on top of the outhouse or latrine. Let me explain the procedure a little more. If, when I got home, no one was about, I would secrete the books under our house which, since we were poor, was even lower than the library. If there were people around--my mother chatting with friends or my brothers playing--I'd go straight to the outhouse and leave them there. The outhouse was about fifty yards from our house and, fortunately for me, the zinc sheets covering it were loose and I could insert my books between them without anyone being the wiser.

With the books, more or less, now readily available during the weekend, I had only to create opportunities to read them. The outhouse provided a relatively comfortable opportunity.

There was a crack between two boards, conveniently situated, so that while reading I could keep a weather eye out for anyone approaching. Thus, I usually had enough notice to return the book to its place of concealment. As can be imagined, I had a few narrow escapes as my involvement in the book became so total that I often became oblivious to everything else.

"Who's in here?" the simultaneous rattling of the door and my mother's voice startled me so much that I nearly dropped the book--must have been a Hardy Boys--I was reading.

"It's me, Mummy," I stammered, holding the book behind me, and at the same time clutching at the door to ensure that it didn't fly open.

"What are you doing in there so long?" she demanded.

"I'm not feeling so good," I groped for a reply. "My belly is hurting."

"Must be all those green mangos you ate," came the reply. "I told you not to eat so many." I couldn't think of any reply.

"Anyway, try hurry up and call me when you are finished. Take some Andrews to settle your stomach." Relieved, almost trembling, I watched my mother's back as she returned to the house. I gave up reading in the outhouse for that day.

The mango trees in the orchard, about a hundred or so yards behind our house, provided another favorite reading cum hiding place for me. I'd ascend the leafiest of trees to where I had discovered a sturdy and comfortable branch where I could read in relative peace and quiet.

Also, there was no indoor plumbing and so, water, for whatever purpose, had to be fetched from a communal stand pipe situated a good distance from our house. Most people used going to the pipe as an opportunity to play (kids) or gossip (adults). I used it mostly to read. On leaving home with my empty bucket, I'd slip my book from its hiding place under the house and put it into the bucket so my mother couldn't see it if, perchance, she looked through the window. To get more time for reading, I'd give others my turn, but I had to be careful not to get too engrossed in my book.

"Boy, why are you taking so long?" my mother would ask, occasionally, as I emptied my bucket in the steel drum used for storing water in the house. My excuses would vary from, "Pipe running slow, Mummy," to "Plenty people fetching water, Mummy."

In retrospect, I must confess that my passion for reading was a bit--perhaps more than a bit--obsessive. Even while keeping goal in a soccer game, when the ball was at the other side of the field, I'd pick up the book which I'd thoughtfully put there for just such a lull in the action. While going on errands on my father's bike, I'd seize the opportunity to read a bit. This was not as dangerous as it sounds. While riding slowly and steering with my right hand, I'd hold the book up with my left so that I could read. It was an unpaved, brick road, so I could easily hear the noise of the occasional car and take precautions.

This state of affairs went on for awhile, but, like all things, whether good or bad, it had to come to an end.

"Chico, look Cousin Eileen coming!" the urgent whisper from one of my friends jolted me back from wherever it was, my book--it must have been a Hardy Boys--had transported me. By the time I had processed the words and scrambled guiltily to my feet, while at the same time trying frantically to stuff the book under my shirt, it was too late. Retribution, in the form of Mrs. Eileen Chichester, my mother, loomed ominously, in front of me.

As was my custom on Saturday mornings, I had gone to the pipe to fetch water. As was my custom, also, I had taken the opportunity, between trips, to put in as much reading as possible. The trick was not to delay so much that my mother would notice. Somehow, however, during this trip, I became so engrossed in my reading--it must have been a Hardy Boys--that I had lost track of the time, and my mother, who was waiting for me to accompany her to the market, decided to come see what was delaying me. Looking back now, I feel that in a way, I was kind of relieved that all the hiding and sneaking around had come to an end; even though I enjoyed the thrill of getting away with doing something forbidden, it was at the same time a bit wearing on the nerves and I was tiring of it. Also, I was basically an obedient child and somewhere in my subconscious, I hated having to deceive my mother.

By the time I had processed the words and scrambled guiltily to my feet . . . it was too late. Retribution, in the form of Mrs. Eileen Chichester, my mother, loomed ominously, in front of me.

"Don't bother to hide, young man," she said in that cold, ominous tone that boded no good for the person to whom it was directed. "I see you already. Give me the book." Meekly, and no little embarrassed because everyone at the pipe seemed to be very interested in the show in which I was a most unhappy and unwilling protagonist, I surrendered the book.

"No wonder you are taking so long to fetch the water. Bring the bucket and let's go home." She spoke quietly and unthreateningly, but I, who knew her well, was not fooled. She was a strong believer in not sparing the rod so as not to spoil the child, and I had no doubt as to what was in store for me when I got home.

So far in my life--let me knock on wood and keep both fingers and toes crossed--it has been a fortunate feature that however bleak things might look at a certain point, somehow everything seems to work out in my favor. Luckily, this time was no exception. Marching me home in front of her, my mother kept a tight control of her temper until we entered our house, and then gave wordy vent to her anger as she looked for the whip with which she usually punished us. My tears were already flowing in sympathetic anticipation, when my Guardian Angel, in the untidy but welcome--at least to me--form of Cousin Neville, intervened. He was my mother's cousin and had been living with us since a few months before, when he came to start teaching at the elementary school. Before she could inflict any punishment on me, he took the whip from her and enquired as to the reason for her anger.

"You don't want him to read?" the amazement was evident in my cousin's voice. My mother protested that it wasn't that, exactly, but that I was carrying it to an extreme, and that it was detrimental to both my schoolwork and household chores. Cousin Neville was understanding and conciliatory, and finally managed to convince Mummy that banning me from reading was not such a good idea. Under his mediation, we worked out a compromise whereby I was allowed to read, provided that I didn't overdo it. I am happy to report that even though there were a few hiccoughs along the way, things worked out well and the relationship between my mother and me has been very close ever since.

Often, nowadays, we laugh about those times and I complain to her that I wish I had a similar problem with my sons.

—Chico Chichester
City-As-School HS

Project Notes

Melanie Hammer and Robin Cohen, who have been instrumental in shaping the NYCWP Newsletter for many years, will not be returning to the editorial staff this year. Their experience as editors (and writers) helped coax and prod this Newsletter to its current professional status. The end of an epoch in Newsletter history is marked by their departure. The editorial staff wishes them good fortune in their new creative endeavors, and knows they can be counted on to write thoughtful and provocative book reviews in future issues!

* * * * *

Another transition, another farewell: Gail Kleiner has returned to the classroom. Two years as a teacher-consultant in the Writing Teachers' Consortium and two more years working full-time for the Institute as the coordinator of the Writing Teachers Consortium stoked Gail's desire to return to the front line, to put into practice all that she considered in her years at the Institute. Four ninth-grade classes, mentoring a new teacher, and writing articles for the Newsletter conspire to fulfill her wishes.

* * * * *

Louise M. Vallet, who participated in the Open Institute this past summer, has just had original poetry published in the *American Poetry Anthology*, Volume X, Nos. 1, 2. She was also one of ten finalists for "Poet of the Year" at the American Poetry Association's convention in New Orleans this past July. Her poems focus on love, family, friendship, and hope for the future.

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Johanna Franke, who teaches at Lehman College, continues the tradition of NYCWP teachers-as-writers with the publication of an article, "Students Write to Learn," in the September/October 1990 issue of *Strategies*, a journal for physical and sport educators. The article describes how Johanna used journals in physical education and dance classes. Also of interest in considering Johanna's final product is the way it came to be: Johanna worked on the article all last year in the Saturday Writing Workshops sponsored by the Project.

* * * * *

The NYCWP and the Boston Writing Project have received a planning grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Readers Digest Fund to develop a project in which teachers at urban Writing Projects across the country will document and disseminate their classroom practice in the teaching of writing. The Project will focus on four areas: how teachers adapt theory and practice in the teaching of writing to urban settings, alternative ways to measure students' progress in writing and learning, how teachers use students' languages and cultures in the classroom, and how parents and the community are involved in urban schools. A full proposal will be submitted to the Fund this spring, and there's a possibility of a two-week residential institute for participating teachers this summer. Stay tuned for more news about this program.

—Lisa Rosenberg
James Monroe HS

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