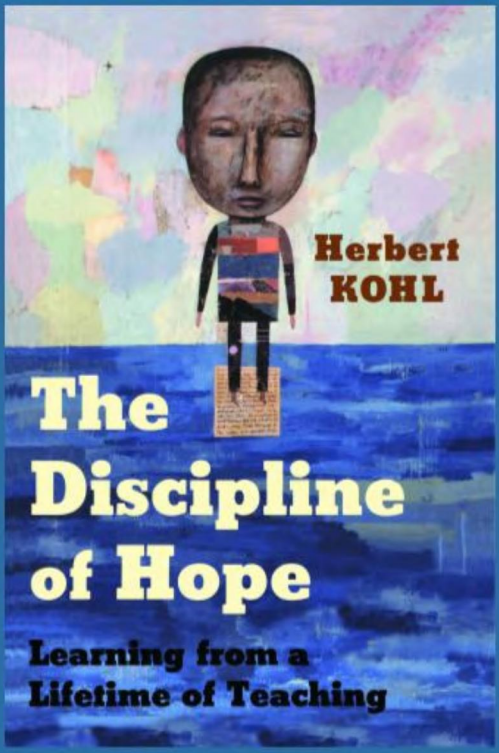

The Discipline of Hope

Learning from a Lifetime of Teaching

Herbert Kohl

EasyRead Large

Copyright Page from the Original Book

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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The Age of Complexity
36 Children
The Open Classroom
View from the Oak (with Judith Kohl)
Growing with Your Children
Growing Minds: On Becoming a Teacher
From Archetype to Zeitgeist: An Essential Guide to Powerful Ideas
I Won't Learn from You
Should We Burn Babar?

To Judy
with love

Introduction

A Lifetime of Teaching

> It is inconceivable how many things children are capable of, if all the opportunities of instructing them were laid hold of, with which they themselves supply us.
>
> —Benjamin Franklin, "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania" (1749)

This book is an attempt to share my life as a teacher and reaffirm the obligation of providing all young people with the richest, most challenging, and best-crafted education imaginable. The book does not provide a simple formula for school change, nor does it presume to address all of the current problems of American education. It does, however, suggest some specific ways in which education can work, especially for poor children. It is about education "on the ground"—about the daily, intimate, and complex interaction between teacher, students, and the content and process of learning. It is also about what I have come to call the discipline of hope: the refusal to accept limits on what your students can learn or on what you, as a teacher, can do to facilitate learning.

Providing hope to young people is the major challenge of teaching. Through engaging the minds and

imaginations of children, teachers can help children develop the strength, pride, and sensitivity they need to engage the world, and not to despair when things seem stacked against them. Even though hope is not sufficient to provide a good life or even guarantee survival, it is a necessity. However, to teach hope you yourself must be hopeful, must believe that all children have a right to learn and can indeed learn.

When I began teaching in the 1960s I felt that education had an important role to play in solving some of the major social problems in the United States. Many of us believed that the civil rights movement would lead to the elimination of racism, and that the Poor People's Campaign would make a significant contribution to the elimination of poverty. We were wrong about racism and poverty but certainly not about the central role of education in providing hope and opportunity for many people.

Just recently, I have had a number of conversations with old teaching friends, people whose careers are as long as mine and who continue to teach with energy and love for their students. A few of them have expressed a loss of hope, a sense that our society is undoing much of the work they do, that the defunding of public education is symptomatic of the abandonment of the children of the poor. They worry that an effective and creative education is no longer a route to a decent job and life, and they express dismay at the cynicism of many of their students.

friendly, mutually respectful relationship with pupils—and not let them get the notion that children are a necessary evil."

These contrary views of the relationship between schools and children represent the poles of current debates about schooling. What is different is that we are now at a critical juncture in the history of public education: the very survival of free public education as a right and entitlement is in question. In those days, people were trying to patch up a system that everyone believed could be made to work. Now the belief in democracy is weaker, and to have hope for all children is often put down as naive and romantic.

The conflict between advocates of unquestioned adult authority and harsh discipline, on the one hand, and respect for students and parents (in particular those who are poor and culturally non-European) on the other is at the heart of current debates about school restructuring, testing, curriculum change, and multiculturalism. The 1950s attack on "progressive education" finds its echo in the present standards debate, in which high standards are often mistaken for high test scores. And 1950s conflict between parents and school authorities is reflected in current disagreements about who is accountable for school failure and who should control public education money.

When I began teaching the fifth and sixth grades in Harlem in 1962, I learned that the schools didn't work for my students, most of whom were poor and either African American or Puerto Rican. Most of what

I had learned at teachers' college was irrelevant, and I found myself in the position of having to choose between experimenting with teaching or giving up on myself as a teacher and on my students as learners. Since the latter was not an option for me, I decided to explore new ways of teaching that would hook my students into learning. I looked to *them* for clues, listened and read what was available, and every once in a while ventured out into unknown territory myself. The specifics of these explorations, which have continued over the past thirty-five years, make up the substance of this book.

At that time I searched for experimental materials and new ideas and found that most of those available in the schools came from the post-*Sputnik* science and math curriculum projects supported by the Executive Branch of the White House under John F Kennedy and later Lyndon Johnson. These led to the new math, physics, biology, and social studies curricula that were widely disseminated in the schools during the 1960s. Some of the material was floating around my elementary school. I tried to use it but discovered that, though the material was conceptually interesting, it was developed with no sense of how my children learned or of teachers' everyday lives and the demands made on us in public schools. It was all top-down material, coming mostly from university professors with no public school experience and certainly no experience teaching in poor and culturally diverse communities. I used what I could, but eventu-

ally abandoned the material in favor of things I made myself, borrowed from other teachers, or cobbled together from old textbooks and worksheets. I tried the new math, for example, but found that my fifth- and sixth-grade students couldn't make any sense of the abstract concepts they were asked to learn, while they did want to know how to calculate and understand the role of numbers (and especially money) in their lives. I had either to build a curriculum that related to them, or fail them because of someone else's idea of how and what they needed to learn.

What emerged from this experience was a conviction that if school change was to be truly effective it had to begin in classrooms and schools, with caring and creative teachers and administrators who would develop and test the materials out of concern for their students' learning. Useful change would not come from a government grant, a university-based project, or a national or state-mandated program.

Early in my career, I saw that teaching that did not respond to students' needs simply did not work. I also saw that rigid programs that depended upon heavy doses of phonics and rote learning led not merely to many students' failure, but to their confusion and discouragement as well. I began experimenting with more democratic and participatory ways of learning, and especially with imaginative writing. I wasn't the only teacher doing this; during the sixties and seventies many teachers were discovering the power of their students' voices and the

importance of beginning with students' interests and experiences in order to prepare the ground for other, more sophisticated learning. Unfortunately, this strategy was often taken to mean simply centering learning on student interests—to me, a condescending way of limiting the scope of learning. This was not at all what we had in mind. Education has to be as demanding as it is giving. There are many things of value in the adult world, and it is our obligation as teachers to balance children's needs and interests with exposure to the social, cultural, and technological achievements that are our gifts to them.

The word "education" is derived from the Latin *educere,* which means "to lead, to draw out, to bring forth" and, by extension, "to rear, nurture, and foster growth." It is in this original sense, of one who draws young people out into encounters with what they do not yet know, while honoring what they do know, that I define myself as a teacher. For me, to be a teacher means to help students move toward a larger and continually expanding encounter with knowledge and experience, while also celebrating what they already know.

Listening to students' voices and responding to their interests meant giving up the authoritarian role of the teacher. I found myself much more at ease in dialogue with my students than in telling them what to do all the time. Through this work, and through the work of many other teachers during the sixties, there came to be a new conversation in education;

it was not so much a movement as a different way of talking about children, education, and schools.

In those days, the energy students brought back to us teachers when we simply listened to them and responded to the content of their writing and the sensitivity of their conversation made many of us feel like explorers in new territories of learning. I have since learned that we were reinventing a tradition that reaches back to American progressive-education movements that developed as early as the 1840s.

To call what we were doing anti-authoritarian, though that was how the media characterized it, was too negative and gave no sense that central to our teaching were a positive pedagogy and a faith in our students' ability to learn if only the conditions were right. We believed that an emphasis on the students' own voices would lead to serious imaginative and intellectual work, especially for those students whose voices and communities were marginalized. As African American communities throughout the country voiced their needs and demanded respect for their intelligence, we found, on the more intimate scale of the classroom, our students doing the same thing.

The term we chose to describe this work was "open education." The word "open" stood for both a commitment to dialogue and an understanding that there were many roads to excellence, that no one method or type of education could suit all the diverse and complex communities or children in public schools.

Program are still thriving and have lasted long enough to become a permanent feature of the system. I believe much of this success is due to John Davis, who was the superintendent of schools in Minneapolis when the experimental schools were established. He was smart enough to support most of the new open schools from the top while letting power devolve to the school sites and enabling people committed to open education actually have the freedom to do it. He understood the power of teachers taking control of and assuming responsibility for their work.

I am currently working with the same kind of program in the New York City public school system, but now there is wider support for autonomy and diversity within public school systems and, among many parents and community groups, there is greater educational sophistication. The lessons of the sixties and the seventies have not been forgotten and the mistakes, I hope, need not be repeated.

During the sixties I also became involved in developing programs that would support and honor children's imaginative writing. By centering these efforts on the voices of children and the process of imaginative writing, we could provide students with a basis for intellectual and social development rooted in their own experience and culture. As founding director of the Teachers and Writers Collaborative in 1966, I worked with teachers and writers to place creative expression at the center of the curriculum. Now, over thirty years later, Teachers and Writers serves over

10,000 students a year and has published dozens of books on the teaching of writing.

Although the terms of many of these conversations have changed, much of what critics of the public schools were saying in the sixties and seventies is now debated with even more passion. And there are few voices defending the public schools as presently constituted. During my career I have learned to listen carefully to the parents whose children I have served, and to make efforts to understand their values, aspirations, and cultures. This has led me to place diversity, multiculturalism, and cross-cultural communication at the center of my teaching, as well as to understand that no matter how precious my ideas seem to me, I have to measure them against the dreams, needs, and aspirations of the people I serve. This means, for example, that no matter how repugnant I find standardized testing, I must honor my students' need to do well on the tests, and their parents' demand that they be prepared for tests even if the tests are biased. This is mediated education in the real world—that is, trying to change the way education is done without sacrificing the future of one's students in the process. It is very difficult, because it involves negotiating the very fuzzy border between helping children adapt to a dysfunctional system and helping them maintain their integrity and risk being damaged or marginalized for trying to change the system. As a teacher I am always negotiating, moving between possibility and vision.

Listening to my students and to the voices of their cultures and communities has led me to become active in changing the schools through redoing the curriculum. Cultural diversity, the history and voices of women and gay and lesbian people, and the contributions of working people to the making of our country have come to be part of my idea of what democratic education must embrace. I have worked with many other people to make that happen. Even more than open education, the reshaping of curriculum content has succeeded in broadening educational thinking about what children ought to know.

In addition the issue of choice within the public schools—which dates back at least to the sixties, when many parents and teachers decided that they and not some centralized bureaucracy should have control over education on a school and community level—has broadened to include such issues as restructuring school systems themselves, enabling charter schools, and issuing school vouchers; on the far right, the legitimacy of public education as an entitlement is even questioned. What began as an argument for community control of schools in a progressive context has become a major political debate about the future of public education.

Over the years there have been times of despair as well as times of hope. I look back on teaching through times of ghetto riots, of running a high school in Berkeley during the late sixties and early seventies, of being in the classroom during the Vietnam era and

the Reagan years of "benign" neglect of the poor and the consequent disintegration of urban communities. I remember the earliest school computers—they had keyboards and no monitors—and have been taught about interactive media by my students, who entered the electronic world quicker than I did. Through all this I've tried to make my teaching both rooted in its time and beyond and bigger than its time. I want to help young people know who and where they are, but I also want them to share what other people know, what work they do, what wonders people have already created in science, culture, and the arts. I want students to explore learning through doing but also through reflection and hard study. I want them to learn hard skills in soft ways. Most of all, I want my students, wherever I teach, to feel part of a compassionate learning community where they are honored as individuals, where they respect each other, and where they respect and love learning itself. In other words, I want it all. I don't get it, of course, and the limits on what can be accomplished in any classroom are the challenge that keeps me teaching knowing that there is always more that can be done.

In this book I've described times in my teaching career when I've learned how to teach better. This book is not a theoretical tract on education, nor is it an autobiography. It is about an ongoing love affair with teaching and about the wonderful growth that can emerge when adults and children come together for the sake of learning.

ing difficult circumstances. Learning is a confirmation of her will and identity, a proof to her that at eighty-five she can still grow.

Addie is one of my most faithful and critical readers, and her comments always bring me back to my own work and struggles. It is harder to teach and nurture hope for young people now than it was thirty-six years ago, when I began teaching in the New York City public elementary schools. This thought occurred to me on a recent trip to New York. I had some time to kill and decided to wander around Grand Central Station as I used to do as a teenager. It was rush hour and the main hall was full of people charging from one destination to another, some making stops at a newsstand, a dry cleaner's, or a fast-food outlet. People studiously avoided looking at each other, clutched their purses and briefcases, and navigated the space with the purposeful intensity of bees heading home with full loads of pollen. I felt deliciously out of place. I found a cafe, ordered a double espresso, and watched people.

After about fifteen minutes I noticed a peripheral disturbance in the rhythm and movement around me. Five boys, one of whom could not have been more than seven while the others were around nine and ten, wandered through the crowd. They stopped at a newsstand and spoke to a vendor, who handed them something—candy, maybe, or money—and then chased them away. The boys made for the

men's room, entered, then emerged in less time than it would have taken to undo their zippers.

The five children were African American or Latino. Three of them bumped into a person and then ran off to meet the other two, who had just emerged from a tourist gift shop. Then the five of them passed by me. Four were talking to each other and the fifth, the youngest, had fallen behind and was slowly following them, getting lost in the crowd. All of a sudden he stopped, put his thumb in his mouth, looked slowly around, and then, as if panic had overcome him, ran straight through the crowd until he joined his friends. They kept moving, ignoring him, and he trailed behind, sucking his thumb.

The image of that child has haunted me for the past months. At that moment I saw those boys, as I've seen all my students over the years, as complex mysteries, people who know only the smallest amount about themselves and what they are capable of, partially formed individuals with semi-defined surfaces and hidden talents, interests, and resources. I know as much about these boys, who haven't the slightest idea of my existence, as I do about most of my students before meeting them on the first day of class. Perhaps I know more.

I can imagine each of them in my class and speculate about how to draw them into a circle of learners so that the energy and intelligence they put into predatory wanderings can be transformed into positive searches that nurture their own learning. Yet how can

we entice them into places of learning? I believe that the climate of hope that informed the beginning of my teaching career has dissipated or been replaced by cynicism and rejection, not just in public debate over the schools, but in the hearts and minds of the children.

Teaching begins as an encounter among strangers. This is particularly true for beginning teachers. When I began my first full year of teaching in 1962, the year I wrote about in *36 Children,* I was a stranger to my students and their community and was quite aware of it. I grew up in a working-class Jewish community in the Bronx; attended Harvard and then Teachers College, Columbia, both overwhelmingly white institutions in the late 1950s and early 1960s; and did my student teaching and substitute teaching in schools that had a mixture of white and Puerto Rican students. However, during my first full year of teaching at P.S. 103, all thirty-six of my students were African American or Caribbean. The community was African American, bustling with all the complex and, to me, unfamiliar institutions of African American life. I remember a bounty of churches and mosques, some in storefronts or basements, others in imposing stone edifices. There were offices of antipoverty and community-based organizations, including the Harlem Tenants Committee, which during the 1964 New York World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens, ran its own "World's Worst Fair" calling attention to the terrible living conditions in Harlem. There were beauty parlors

and barbershops, bars, candy stores, small restaurants, coffee shops, a diner, and an occasional family-run supermarket or bodega. The community was poor but cohesive, and many of the families had lived there for several generations.

P.S. 103, however, was a monument to the nineteenth-century commitment to public education that had barely survived into the mid–twentieth century. My mother had attended the school sometime between 1915 and 1925, when the community was Jewish and Italian. By the time I got to teach there, the imposing five-story brick building was in a state of terminal disarray. The high ceilings of my classroom, which was on the top floor, were falling down in several places. The room had little alcoves where bay windows looked out over the brownstones below. In two places you could see through the walls to the external structure of the building. The tongue-and-groove wooden floors looked as if they hadn't been cleaned in a half century, and the desks—thirty-five of them for my thirty-six children—had once been bolted to the floor. Half of them had come unscrewed and slid easily across the room, leaving track marks in the floor. Pushed into the corner was an old grand piano with a fifth of its keys gone. It was soiled with plaster that had come down from the ceiling, and piled with old and torn textbooks, wall charts, and the tattered remains of what must once have been beautiful cloth maps that could be hung at the blackboard. Half of the blackboard was usable. From my perspective as

a twenty-five-year-old first-year teacher, this classroom was very exciting. It may not have been much, but it was mine.

As it turned out, the piano, the alcoves by the bay windows, and the unbolted desks were blessings. They helped me overcome my biggest problems: getting to know the children and getting them to trust me. They provided me with some of the first experiences that led me to a critical understanding: that what often seem like obstacles to learning and potential distractions from it are in fact the keys to making connections with students.

Take the piano, for instance. At first, instead of thinking of all the wonderful music we could make in the classroom, I thought of how to keep it locked away from the children, or how to use it as a reward for other, more "serious" learning, such as reading and math. I worried about students sneaking over to it and making noise to distract me and the rest of the class. I worried about control, about my planned curriculum, about what other teachers and my principal would think if they heard kids playing around with the piano during reading time.

However, during the first few weeks of school my students put me to the test with the piano. It was irresistible to two children in particular: Larry and Ellen. *Everything* seemed irresistible to Larry, except for sitting in his desk and working. During the course of a morning he and his unbolted desk would migrate from one side of the room to the other and often

disputes without disrupting learning or excluding children.

There was one thing, however, that I had already begun to understand as a teacher: moments of tension and conflict can be turned into occasions for learning if managed sensitively. I realized that having a trial was an opportunity to teach the complexities and virtues of a jury system. If the goal became to teach about our system of justice in the context of resolving a problem, rather than to find guilt and institute punishment, the negativity in the class might be turned into greater understanding of civil and community life, both in the classroom and in the children's futures.

I spent time explaining the jury trial system, including such notions as reasonable doubt, jury polling, testimony, proof, and evidence. I also had the contending students choose attorneys and prepare cases, had the whole class select a jury, and even appointed a court reporter. Then, after three or four days of preparation that took up about three-quarters of an hour a day, we had a trial. By this time the conflict seemed to have died down and there was no longer a threat of all-out warfare among the students.

Here are some of the students' comments on the trial:

Rachael

Wed. Afternoon at 1:30 my class had a trial. My teacher Mr. Kohl, was the judge. Some chil-

dren were selected to be the jury. The two defendants were Belinda C. and Joyce. Belinda's lawyer was Sam, and Joyce's lawyer was Ruth.

It started when someone said Ellen, and Theresa had notty hair. There were witnesses for Joyce and Belinda. Joyce won the case.

I think the whole case was ridiculous. But I also think the jury made a good decision.

Connie:

November 15 1962

COURT'S DISCUSSION

Yesterday we had a court discussion as you all know it of course was between Belinda and Joyce and you wanted to know my opinion well you think Belinda was wrong not everybody but almost the whole class except for a few others I think she was wrong because I how Joyce is you might not Think so but I almost know her as much as she knows herself (and you know much she knows herself) and she's a very nice girl I think she is (except for a few other people on her side which is one or two) but Belinda is very rude and kinda complicated child and she's always starting something or in something that she don't know the first thing about and always starting fights or something I'm not trying to say that she's not better than anybody else but she's kinda you know coo coo and doesn't know what she's talking

about half of the time. And if Joyce talks about somebody (but she really doesn't) it in a nice way of saying they're nice or pretty or you know! But Belinda every time I look over there she's running her trap (and so and so and so and this and that and bla bla bla she's always talking about somebody. maybe I'll stop looking over there and think of her as a nice person.

Belinda

I think the trial was not fair because the jury was prejudiced because all of them said I was guilty and I wasn't guilty. Many of them said I was right until I accused them of being prejudiced. And they know I was right that is why they took that vote.

Ruth

I think the Trail was very fair. I made up a story about two woman one woman's name was Clara and the other's name was Phillis. One day Clara was putting her garbage in Phillis' yard. Now Phillis saw her but said it was nothing. Clara keep doing it and the more Phillis kept it in her the more Clara put in. Phillis began to turn *pale* and then. Everyone was looking at her and wondering what was wrong. She wouldn't say a word of it not even to her husband. She got so sick of it 'til she had to take the case to court. The jury lis-

tened and said the case was dismissed. Phillis won, and Clara had to pay $200.00 fine because of littering. I think the guilty person should be made to pay five cents fine.

I wasn't on Brenda Thacker's side or Belinda's. How my name was in it was beyond me. P.S. Mr. Kohl, if you were there what would you have done?

Sandra

I think that wasn't a fair trail. You was on Joyce's side. The whole class seems like they dosen't like Belinda but I do I don't care if you don't like me and Belinda or Janette but I do you talk nice to the other kids but don't nice to us if we say something you jump down our thouts. Mr. Kohl I know you believe Joyce and all her friends so you don't have to hide it because me and Belinda Now and I still say that wasn't a fair trial the kids don't like Belinda that why they charge us guilty.

Fred

I think the most important thing of our trial was when the dession was made. and when we dug down deep and got the facts which Samuel and Joyce dug down and got.

The most troubling aspect of the trial was Sandra's comments. Was I playing favorites? Was there some

deep division in the class that I was insensitive to and that affected the comfort with which some students learned? How complicit was I with the tensions within the group? Frankly, I had no way to answer these questions, and I was very sensitive to wanting all of the students to like me. I now know that desire for approval is characteristic of many caring young teachers. It can be helpful in giving students who have a history of rejection in school a feeling of being welcome and important, but it can also make the teacher vulnerable to manipulation by youngsters who will try to charm him or her into letting them not learn.

In those days I didn't explicitly understand the nature of the personal bonds that have to be created in order for serious learning to take place, but I was determined to become an effective teacher and brought everything I knew and cared about to bear upon teaching that class. In 1962, for me, that meant creating a resolutely Eurocentric curriculum. I wanted my students to like me; I wanted us to trust each other; and I wanted the classroom to be a nonviolent place, but that wasn't enough. Imaginative engagement with ideas, and the development of literacy in both reading and math were and continue to be at the center of my work with young people. No amount of good feeling is adequate without that pedagogical dimension, without students actually knowing more and being able to do more at the end of a school year than they could at the beginning.

Not all the papers were completely negative. Frances wrote: "From Madison Avenue to about the middle of the block the houses are kept clean. The back yards are kept swept and the stoops are clean. I like my building and block." Other students also indicated that they lived on islands of stability and decency in the midst of a violent and depressed neighborhood. What struck me was how life had forced adult awareness and sensitivity upon the children. They were not protected from death; they saw or lived poverty. Rats and garbage were themes in their experience, accompanying all their attempts to create more harmonious lives. One student invited me to come and see the reality for myself; another described how she stayed holed up in her apartment.

My follow-up to the children's responses was to ask them to write about what they would do if they could change their block. I wanted to tap into their dreams as well as their immediate reality. Phyllis's response was full of the rage all the children felt about what they were forced to live with:

> If I could change my block I would stand on Madison Avenue and throw nothing but Teargas in it. I would have all of the people I liked to get out of the block and then I would become very tall and have big hands and with my big hands I would take all of the narcotic people and pick them up with my hands and throw them in the Oceans and Rivers too. I would let the people I like move into the projects so they could

tell their friends they live in a decent block. If I could do this you would never see 117st again.

The students' responses to these two assignments entirely changed my plans for that school year. Originally I had intended to take a fresh approach to the material in the standard curriculum. We would study the frontier, the industrial revolution in the United States, and world geography in hands-on ways. My impulse was not so much to reject the curriculum as to transform it from a mechanical and rigid sequence into an interesting series of projects based on inquiry and experience. I wanted to motivate my students to learn what the system wanted them to, only in a more creative way. I did not intend to raise issues such as poverty, racism, sexism, and pervasive violence. I wanted to be a creative teacher, and it was the students' responses that moved me to understand that I couldn't be one without also being militant and passionate in defense of their right to a decent childhood and to the hope of a welcoming place for them in the adult world.

My class was 6-1. That meant that of the seven sixth-grade classes in the school they were academically the top. Yet many of the students acted as if learning were their enemy. They ran around the classroom with abandon, interrupted class discussions, and in general tried to make my life miserable. I noticed that although most of them could read on a fourth- or fifth-grade level, and some—like Rachael, Fred, and Larry—could read just about anything you

put before them, none of them wrote well. There were also a few students who could barely read at all. Except for Rachael, the children had formal mathematical skills way behind what the system expected of sixth-graders.

My pride and my expectations for my students pressured me to find a way to have the class acquire skills and exceed the expected grade levels. Never in my whole teaching career has it occurred to me that there are limits to what any student can do. The limitations I perceive are to do with how ingenious or sensitive I can be in devising the right situation or discovering the right materials to reach into my students. I am hopelessly optimistic when it comes to believing in people's capacity to grow and learn. Such optimism has occasionally led conservative educators to accuse me of romanticism, but I readily accept any accusations of being positive and hopeful in the service of my students.

That first year of teaching, I was torn between being creative within the system, and following my instincts and the children's responses to what I presented to them. There were no guidelines or formulas to follow, but the students' voices spoke to me so strongly that the authority of my supervisors, the instructions in teachers' manuals, and the practices of my colleagues weren't collectively strong enough to keep me from listening to those voices, learning from them, and then teaching to my conscience. Besides, the school around me was a shambles. Students

roamed the halls; many of the teachers screamed themselves hoarse every day or simply gave up teaching and presented the children with coloring books and crayons to keep them seated and silent. Racism was rampant, though not explicitly articulated except in the teachers' lunchroom, which, after a few encounters with bitter and defeated colleagues, I avoided. Sticking within the system didn't have much to recommend itself to a young teacher.

It was also easier for me, in 1962, to break with the system than it might be for beginning teachers these days. It was the heyday of the civil rights movement in the South, and many of us new teachers considered ourselves part of the northern branch of the movement. We worked in communities that were as segregated, impoverished, and victimized as any in the South. P.S. 103 had over a thousand students, only one of whom was white. Once he graduated, the school never had another white student. It was torn down a few years later and replaced by a new building renamed P.S. 79. So far as I know P.S. 79 has never had a (non-Latino) white student.

The words of the students obsessed me. What was my responsibility when they hurt so much? I couldn't change their block but could I give *them* power to change it in the future, or the skills to leave and to succeed in the larger city? *Should* they leave? What would happen to the children left behind? How could I change the whole school, when I didn't even know what to do in my own classroom?

At times I felt these questions were interfering with my teaching. How could I focus on spelling tests, on introducing new concepts in mathematics—on the industrial revolution—when bigger moral issues were untouched? I tried to talk to my colleagues about my dilemma, but it was impossible. None of them wanted to talk about teaching or children with a first-year teacher. Some of them warned me not to raise questions that might upset people. As it was, I had been involuntarily transferred to the school and didn't have tenure. I decided it was best to shut up, at least until I could get union protection.

By Halloween, I knew I had to do something for my children. In many ways, that Halloween was the most important day of my life. The school day itself was uneventful, except that the students were more restless than usual. There was an air of anticipation. I sensed an unusual glee in the kids that morning. People were waiting for the night—for the celebrations, the costumes, the tricks even more than for the treats. My students told me that they ran around with socks full of chalk and marked up everyone in sight. Anthony and John told me about going up to the rooftops and throwing water and "stuff" down at people partying in the streets.

I had my own fantasies of Halloween in Harlem, a white man's fantasies mixing fear and admiration. I wanted to stay in the community and be part of the celebration, and indeed I was invited to a few parties by my students' parents. But apprehension about

great majority of my students had mastered basic phonic skills, they had major difficulties comprehending material that was supposed to be on their grade level. Vocabulary was the main problem. The children could speak and think on mature and complex levels, but they did not have a mastery of the standard language of ideas and emotions. When they encountered such language in a text they panicked, and the other reading skills they had developed were of no use to them. Guessing could take them just so far; then they were lost. I reasoned that, given the Greek roots of much English intellectual language, I could build vocabulary through an encounter with word-origin stories and indirectly increase my students' reading power.

My vocabulary lessons worked. I remember explaining to the class that the word "sarcasm" meant "flesh cutting," and referred to the Greek Dionysiac ritual of stripping the flesh from a living person. For a week, everything negative was described as "sarcastic," and we had some wonderful discussions in class about how bad a comment had to be to qualify as sarcasm rather than mild joking or simple ridicule. I followed up that lesson by introducing words such as "skepticism" and "irony," and then "hyperbole" and "metaphor."

One of my great pleasures that year was to watch the children's faces light up with recognition as they came upon a word from the vocabulary list in their reading. They expressed the joy that comes from

being able to use something you have learned, and I felt like a gardener who has prepared his soil well.

Vocabulary, however, was just a small part of the program. I wanted the children to imagine different, better worlds, to think about their city and their block as temporary, as made by people who could also remake them. I created a curriculum to tease their imaginations into hope for themselves and for the communities in which they would later live. I wanted to connect, through a study of the early history of humanity, to the current civil rights movement. My curriculum was about the making of culture, and for me the civil rights movement was about the remaking of culture. In both cases everyone's effort was required to make the world better; I wanted my students to feel that their voices counted and that their intelligence and ingenuity were important.

I began my teaching career fully committed to both a Eurocentric curriculum and civil rights. I did not see them as contradictory. On the contrary, they enriched each other through the study of society-making. My use of Greek mythology and culture was neither didactic nor normative. We did not memorize facts about the Greeks, or drill and practice the names of Greek gods and goddesses. Nor did I waste time praising Greece as superior to other cultures. To me it was one among many I could have chosen as a starting point, but it was one that I knew well and that excited me.

I did not teach Greece in order to produce experts on Greek culture. My goal was to draw my students into the creation of new myths and the development of their own social visions. I encouraged them to rewrite old tales and change them. The goal was to have them draw upon their own experience and, through the structures of Greek mythology, classical fables, and other traditional genres, develop larger conceptions of the world.

Writing was a vehicle for exploring thoughts and feelings. It was a starting point, a way of setting things down so we could talk about them, dramatize them, and discuss how the world was and how we might make it different. The sheer volume of my students' writing, combined with the variety and complexity of thought it contained, elicited some unanticipated depth of response that required a major shift of my early lesson plans. The students at first responded out of their own experience when they talked about their block. When they wrote of reconstructing their environment, hope was drawn into the mix. Now, through mythology, fables, poetry, autobiography, adventure, science fiction, and mysteries, their imaginations became inflamed and a hunger to write seized them.

I, too, had developed writing fever and began work on a book of my own. In the classroom I let writing time grow and grow, until there were days with no math or social studies or science. The students wrote about everything. Then we spoke about their work,

in terms not of grammar and pronunciation but of substance and content. In February, before we moved into a new school building, the children wrote about their dreams for the new school; then we talked about what a good school might be like.

New School February 4, 1963

Delores

The changes I expect to be by going to the new school; Is that our room will look like something+have a new set of rules. The third change I expect to have is to change from a cold lunch of beans. Then quit the writing on the walls+keep us sanitary and clean! Enough is enough+I'm just fed up with not only beans with some teachers that are employed; Like Mr. Charles in room 401+the teacher in 414.

Gregory

I expect many changes in the school but not much in me. I think the yard would not be so crowded. There will need more monitors in the yard, an office. Some kids will learn more some will learn less.

Theresa

First thing I am going to thank God that they're getting out of 103. I expect we won't have

no beans and glue soup. I expect that we won't be on the top floor. I expect that we'll go home earlier and go to lunch earlier and when it is cold out side they will let us come in on line. And some other children will get a chance to be monitors. I expect we'll have movies in the classroom I expect new desk and chairs to write and sit on. I expect no writing on walls and I hope to graduate.

Belinda

I hope that in the knew school we will have a better program. One of the changes I would like is that we would have more activities. Many of the small children would have a separate play yard. It would be nice if we could have cake sales, parties where the children join in so we can feel we helped the school. I hope down in the lunch room we have a change of things. Like a new group of lunch ladies who don't steal the lunch. I don't think we should use spoons so much I think we should have knife and fork. I think we should have different kind of dessert

Connie

I expect P.S. 103 to fall and if it doesn't it has to be a miracle because people's great grandmothers were going to this school and I expect the new school to be like Cooper a little bit and in every way the food has to be nothing like 103. I

Conference's "Children's Crusade" in Birmingham, elementary and high school students in that city demonstrated against segregation. Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor retaliated with police dogs, fire hoses, and mass arrests. My students wrote about those events and tried to make sense out of them.

Rachael

I think that all the Negroes and all the whites are very brave to go down south and parade. I know that it is easy to fight but hard not to fight. Some people say that people will never get freedom but I know they will.

Phyllis

BIRMINGHAM ALA.

I think that the white people in Birmingham are not treating the colored right because every time a colored person goes somewhere a white person says something bad about him. The white people always turn everyone else against the colored. The white people think they are so good but the colored are just as good. The whites are jealous of us because they think we will get a better education and they don't want us to get ahead of them if the Negroes get their freedom. They would treat the white better than they are being treated now.

Every man is created equal.

Deidre

I think that the white and the colored peoples should always be friendly with each other. And that they should not be slaves for the big shots. They should have their freedom like other people do now I don't know what the white and colored people have against each other. But I know that it is horrible it will be a miracle if the white and colored people come together to work and play like human beings and not like animals.

THE END

Rachael

I think that the whites should be friendly with the colored should be friends because after all colored came over from Africa to let the cotton and crops grow while the whites don't even know what's going on. It was also a colored man taught the people how to preserved plants and vegetables I think its just a horrible that they are like this.

Elsa

I think that it makes sense. The only way that anybody can win this fight is by using their brains and not their hands. The way they are going (the Negro) the whites will give in, because its a con-

stant strain on people. Every body should join the freedom rides.

Allan

I think that the Negro in Alabama are right to be non-violent. Because if they fight back they couldn't get what they want. And I think that its a pity that people have to go out and parade for what they want. After the Bill of Rights and The Declaration of Independence was signed. I hope that the Negroes in Ala. And that the word segregastion disappears off the face of the earth.

John

INTEGRATION

I think the world should be completely integrated so that no matter what race color or creed you can go to any store and be waited on any restaurant and be served and go to any school and learn. Just as much as anyone else without being picked on or ridiculed.

Why! Because all men are created equal and because if everyone were all alike this world would be a great bore looking at yourself all the time and living just the same and hurting the same thing as everyone else

My students and I felt equally powerless to act in the South, and we knew that there were serious racial problems in the North. Writing and talking explicitly

about segregation, nonviolence, and the need to act against racism was a way of engaging in the struggle within the classroom. My students had no problem writing their own versions of Greek myths one day and turning their attention to the civil rights movement the next day. Their energy, which in September had often expressed itself in random acts of disruption, was now focused on trying to understand the world.

Time was a major problem: When to write? How was I to fit in math and science, social studies and the industrial revolution? How could I, at least minimally, comply with my supervisor's demands and the curriculum guidelines of the system so I wouldn't get thrown out of the school? How to get other teachers, the assistant principal, and the principal as excited about the children's work as I was, and to get them to understand how brilliant the students were?

I carried around a portfolio of my students' writing and read it to anyone who was willing to listen or whom I could corner and force to listen. I must have read their papers to dozens of people—at parties, in restaurants, at dinners with friends. My principal wasn't interested.

A few of the other young teachers listened, but for the most part they didn't see anything important in the children's writing. They didn't, as I did and still do, see this writing as one key to help the children open up to learning and become strong enough in themselves to dare to oppose all the forces that con-

spire to force them to accept less than a full place in the society and the economy.

Nor did my colleagues comprehend how the content of children's writing suggested a complete revision of standard educational ideas about who the children were, what they knew, how they thought and could think, and how much they could learn if we only knew how to tap into their brilliance. The ideas the children wrote about, the feelings they expressed, and the dreams and schemes they spun out shaped my thinking about teaching and learning in ways that have permanently affected my life and work. The children developed the courage to show me and each other who they were and what their dreams were. These expressions of trust and hope became the driving force behind my commitment to children, whatever the systems, tests, and experts say about their performance or potential. The authentic voices of children are a challenge to the pious pronouncements of experts and politicians who believe that children can be reduced to test scores and manipulated to meet the needs of an economy that does not honor the value of their lives.

This selection is from the beginning of Arnold's fictionalized autobiography. I must have read it to dozens of people:

The Story of My Life: Foreword

This story is about a boy named Maurice and his life as it is and how it will be. Maurice is in

flowing and see how far it could take us. After reading Arnold's autobiography, the "My Block" assignments, and the fables and other writings I abandoned any sense of being able to predict or know the limits of what my students might do. As a first-year teacher I was overwhelmed by my students' imagination:

Barbara

Once upon a time there was a pig and a cat. The cat kept saying you old dirty pig who want to eat you. And the pig replied when I die I'll be made use of, but when you die you'll just rot. The cat always thought he was better than the pig. When the pig died he was used as food for the people to eat. When the cat died he was buried in old dirt.

Moral: Live dirty die clean.

John

Once a boy was standing on a huge metal flattening machine. The flattener was coming down slowly. Now this boy was a boy who loved insects and bugs. The boy could have stopped the machine from coming down but there were two ladie bugs on the button and in order to push the button he would kill the two ladie bugs. The flattener was about a half inch over his head now he made a decision he would have to kill the ladie bugs he quickly pressed the button. The machine stopped he was saved and the ladie bugs were dead

Moral: smash or be smashed.

Barbara

Once upon a time a girl was walking up the street with her little brother. Her little brother loved to suck a pacifier all of the time. One day he met a little girl that loved to suck her finger. The little boy asked her how does you finger taste? The little girl said it tastes delicious. The girl asked how did the pacifier taste and the boy said delicious. They traded and the boy liked the thumb the best and the girl liked the pacifier best.

Moral: Enjoy them all.

Nick

Once upon a time there was two men who were always fighting so one day a wise man came along and said fighting will never get you anywhere they didn't pay him no attention and they got in quarrels over and over again. So one day they went to church and the preacher said you should not fight and they got mad and knock the preacher out

Can't find no ending.

These fables didn't emerge from the students' imaginations spontaneously. I read the class Aesop and James Thurber's *Fables for Our Time.* We invented variations on morals from dozens of traditional fables. Together we transformed "A stitch in time saves nine" into the following:

A stitch in time saves none.
A stitch in time is fine if you don't have to go to work.
A stitch in time saves glue.
A hit on time saves nine. (A ball game.)
A snitch in time gets everyone in trouble.

The students' work came from the internalization of the reading and class conversations. I had no specific expectations when I asked them to write their own fables; I assured them that anything goes. What was unusual about the writing was the frankness and humor with which the children expressed bitterness, cynicism, and a very hard sense of life. They weren't writing for me; they were writing the truths they lived. I realized that the freedom to speak out in this way was essential to any good education I could provide them.

Phillip's "A Barbarian Becomes a Greek Warrior" and other writings like it convinced me that the Greek and Latin vocabulary and the time I took to tell stories were not incidental diversions but central strategies for eliciting learning and developing the students' comfortable use of their imaginations. Phillip's novella began:

> One day, in Ancient Germany, a boy was growing up. His name was Pathos. He was named after this Latin word because he had sensitive feelings.

For most of the year I was unsure of myself. There was no road map to where the students and I were going. However, there was no question but that I would respond to the students' work with whatever ingenuity and resources I could summon. I chose not to follow the standard curriculum and the school system's demands since it was clear to me that these would lead to failure. Still, I didn't feel on solid educational ground. I was telling stories, spending mornings discussing events in the neighborhood, reading from Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths,* and whenever possible bringing in articles from the *New York Times* about the civil rights movement. Once I tried to lip-synch *Rigoletto,* an opera I knew and loved, with the class; students acted out the murderous events at the end of the opera. Another time I suggested the students build a large (five feet square and five feet high) model of a Sumerian ziggurat; we ended up with a messy mound that resembled a beginning archaeological excavation more than a functioning city complex.

According to the curriculum experts I had read while taking classes to qualify for a teaching credential, sixth-graders had outgrown storytelling. They didn't need to make large-scale art projects. Discussing "my neighborhood" was part of the kindergarten curriculum, irrelevant for twelve-year-olds.

There still is a feeling among educators that storytelling and open-ended conversation have no place in a "serious" curriculum. For me, however, the idea that one should stuff as much "substantial learning" as possible into the limited time children spend in the classroom involves a grave educational miscalculation. When I began teaching I knew that intuitively, and now I feel secure in my conviction that education has to be shaped so that the timbre of students' voices can emerge. This is essential if substantial learning is to develop. The teacher's voice must emerge as well, and students must have the opportunity to engage in dialogue with their teachers. Students and teachers have to learn to speak to each other across culture, class, age, gender, and all the other divides that inhibit the development of intelligence and sensitivity.

Every new class presents that same challenge: how to create a situation in which teachers and students can speak with each other comfortably in their own voices and turn their attention to an open examination of content. My goal, as a teacher, is to allow all of us in the class to explore complex issues in ways that minimize ego involvement and social posturing. That means providing students the safety they need to develop intellectual relationships with each other and with the subject matter, relationships not mediated by worry over grades, laden with self-doubt, or bur-

I will never forget that first dinner at Larry's three-and-a-half-room apartment on the fourth floor of a walk-up on 116th Street. I was an honored guest; an elaborate table was set for me in the middle of the living room, which doubled as a bedroom for the two youngest of Larry's five sisters. Larry's mother, Mary, his grandmother, and several neighbors had made a fancy meal for me. There was fresh cornbread and a spread of potato salad, fried chicken, vegetables, cooked greens, chicken, ribs, and sausages, all garnished with an amazing hot sauce. The centerpiece of the table, which was set for ten, was a bottle of Manischewitz wine, purchased out of respect for my Jewishness. Though I detested that particular wine, I drank the glass Mary offered.

In our conversation it emerged that no teacher had ever come to dinner before and that everyone in the building wanted to know what I looked like. The gap between the children and the people who taught them astonished me. With the exception of one of the other sixth-grade teachers, who had grown up in the neighborhood, none of P.S. 103's teachers or administrators spent any time in homes in the community.

Before we sat down to dinner the phone rang—or at least, that was what I thought I'd heard. The sound was muffled and it was hard to tell where it was coming from. Mary and I were talking about Larry and I was praising his creativ-

ity while avoiding the issue of his wild flights across the classroom, knocking things off people's desks in an effort to amuse everyone and disrupt whatever else was going on in the classroom.

Alison, the oldest, asked Mary what to do and then went to the kitchen and pulled a telephone out of the bread box. Larry explained: "They don't let us have a phone."

It seems that the welfare system had decided that for someone on AFDC, telephones were out of the question—even if, like Mary, you had seven children in school. Answering the phone with a guest like me in the house was a dangerous thing. This was a revelation. What were simple events for me, like answering the telephone, had been turned into furtive activities for many of the children's families. The episode provided insight into the kinds of pressures the children lived with every day and made me understand why getting emergency phone numbers for the children was so charged with secrecy. The numbers couldn't appear on school records, which might be checked by the welfare department.

Dinner was wonderful. All the children had a spark, a brilliance and wildness, that a good teacher has to love. They are the kind of children who challenge you in class, sometimes by annoying you but mostly because their minds are racing with ideas and they want to talk, to know, to touch things, to play, and to learn. They don't have patience for the formal rituals of learning, but want to jump into the

process itself without any preliminaries or ceremonies.

Dinner conversation started with school, then turned to Larry's father, who had died a few years earlier, and to hopes for the children. At first I felt very uneasy. It was a cold evening, so the burners on the stove were lit to warm the apartment, since there was no working central heating in the building. Every corner of the small apartment was crammed with clothes and toys and books. Eight people were stuffed into the three and a half rooms and, except in the living room where everything had been cleared for me, there was no space to move or breathe. The whole apartment had been rearranged for my visit.

I was twenty-five and being treated as if I were an expert, a professional who knew how to educate their children, a person of importance. This was hardly true. I was a novice, an apprentice, and as much of a learner as the children were. The awkward part of the evening came from the disparity between what the family thought of me and what I wanted to be as a teacher and the actual struggles I was having in the classroom.

The conversation turned from school to the civil rights movement in the South, and then to neighborhood gossip. During that evening and many others like it, with other students' families, I learned about the vibrant, complex, and often difficult lives of people in the neighborhood. And I came to honor and to care about them—to care not just about my

students but about their sisters and brothers and parents as well. I developed friendships that lasted beyond the time I spent teaching at P.S. 103, and my involvement in the community led me into political and social struggles in East Harlem over the next seven or eight years.

Judy and I stayed in touch with the family for about ten years, from 1962 when Larry was in 6-1 until about 1972. Larry came to live with Judy and me in Berkeley, California, in 1968 and 1969. He worked at Other Ways, a high school I ran there, and for a while wrote poetry. In 1968 he joined a group of our students who transformed their own poetry into songs using rhythm backgrounds provided by other students on congas. The group traveled to teachers' conferences throughout the country, performing and talking about changing schools. I believe they were among the forerunners of current rap artists.

Judy and I also stayed close to the family until we moved to California. In 1967, when I ran a storefront learning center in East Harlem and became the founding director of the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, they were moved by the welfare department to Brooklyn. The house they were assigned to was bigger than their apartment, but the neighborhood was much more dangerous and the children's lives became more difficult. Three of the children died young.

The loss of gifted people, the loss of students to violence and poverty, is often felt by teachers as a

personal loss. We must know and care enough about our students to grieve for them as well as take part in their joys. It is this personal bond that harnesses the energy to teach creatively despite the often negative momentum of the system in which we teach. The bond between teacher and student is a special kind of intimacy, based on personal commitment of energy and affection to the lives of others. It is easy to understand this kind of reaching beyond oneself in the case of one's own family or lover but the situation is more complex with one's students. It is almost as if the family life cycle is repeated each year, with the birth of a new relationship, the development of mutual bonds and common activity, growth, and finally separation. That is the emotional structure of the life of most teachers (though there are schools that function more like communities and in which teachers and students spend a longer time with each other).

There is a special quality in the parting of teachers and students who care about each other. For the teacher, it has to do with the pleasures of witnessing growth and knowing that one's work has some lasting value. Knowing and caring about your students is not merely an academic matter but is essential to shaping learning for them and a challenge to take them into your life and fight for their survival and growth as if they were your own children. This is not all pleasure; the more intensely you care for your students, the more you grieve for them when they are brutalized by a violent world and the more enraged you become

stay with my class in the old building. It would be a way to express appreciation for the sacrifice of the older children and wish the younger ones well.

The principal turned me down. I tried to fight the decision but there was no mechanism for talking to parents or staff or making the issue public, so we moved. From March to April a number of the left-behind children spent hours at night and on weekends breaking windows and vandalizing the new building, which soon looked no better than the one it replaced.

I spoke with my class about the dilemma of the students left at the old school and they decided it was our responsibility to do something about it. We began visiting P.S. 103 and inviting some of the third- and fourth-graders over to visit us. The children's concern for each other should have been reflected in the administration's attitudes, but it wasn't. At that time Judy was a substitute teacher in one of those fourth grades; I visited with her and her students a few times. The demoralization of both students and staff at the old building was agonizing to witness. I never imagined, when I dreamed of becoming a teacher, that I would have to witness such disorganization, lack of learning, and feelings of abandonment and neglect in a school. I was full of admiration and sorrow for all the children and teachers who forced themselves to come into that half-empty, filthy building, which was in such a state of disarray that the custodians had abandoned the empty classrooms to the rats and the roaches. It was amazing that the

school administrators could turn the move into a new building into an experience of humiliation and rejection, while seeming completely untroubled.

My class's efforts to visit the left-behind children and bring them over to the new school for visits were discouraged. With all the other pressure I felt as a first-year teacher, I gave up trying.

However, that experience made me sensitive to the children who are abandoned when an experiment takes place or a special program comes into a school or a school district. I always ask myself, "Are there leftover children?" and, "How can anything that is good for some group of children be made available to everybody?" And now I am willing to fight for the abandoned and left-behind children even if it means risking my job.

Listening and learning as a teacher has many consequences. It makes you conscious of the environment you work in—aware not merely of whom and where you are teaching but of the social structure imposed upon your work. In many ways it is dangerous for teachers to listen too carefully or learn too much, because doing so often leads to opposing conditions under which no sensible person could teach and no healthy child could learn. I discovered how teachers, for the sake of mere survival, have learned not to listen and not to learn things that would force them into action. Those of us who did listen and learn became involved in school reform movements that continue to the present.

My involvement in school reform has always arisen directly from my work with children and my relationships with people in the communities I served. It has not arisen from books or theories, although I read a lot and honor the task of creating theory as a way of understanding and communicating the ideas that emerge from practice. As a consequence, most of the attempts at school reform I have been involved with are either community-based or grow out of direct work with children. I've never been in the business of school reform—and it is a business, more so in the 1990s than ever before. People have systems to sell, and yet I've never encountered a system that meets the needs of all children or that measures its success on the basis of how every child does. Just about every attempt at school reform seems to try to fit the child to the system rather than help teachers, students, and communities build education that works for them. I believe that is why testing is so prevalent. Educational experts don't trust children, communities, and teachers enough to let them judge the effectiveness of education. School bureaucrats are afraid of children's voices, community control of schools, and critical scrutiny of their work so, for the sake of survival, they use tests, no matter how biased, to evaluate the results of specific efforts and remove the evaluation process from the people most directly affected by programs. "Objective" testing is often a ruse to protect people who do not have a moral commitment to see education work for all children.

The end of my first full teaching year was marked by a sixth-grade graduation both grand and pathetic: grand in that everyone, from the children and their parents to the entire staff and administration, was dressed up as if for a college commencement ceremony; sad in that the staff knew from experience that this was the only graduation ceremony most of the students would ever participate in.

I was assigned to guard the main doors to the school during the ceremony. The principal was worried that a number of teenagers or nonparents from the community might crash the event. I thought they should be invited, be allowed to show pride in the young graduates, but they were seen as the enemy even though most of them were products of the school and had passed as much as seven years of their lives there.

The principal's fears were realized. Two teenagers came to the door and tried to enter. I said that all of the tickets to the ceremonies were taken and they had to stay outside. One of them got very angry; I could see that he was getting ready for a confrontation that I wasn't prepared for. I couldn't understand why I was arguing with him or preventing him from walking into the ceremony, and I felt like a fool enforcing a rule that made no sense to me. In addition, I was scared. If I feel morally right I'm usually able to face down my fear, but not for something as trivial, wrong, and bureaucratic as guarding the school against the community. I backed down and told the young man

that I'd escort him and his friend in and find them seats. He told me to fuck off and left muttering something I decided not to hear.

After the ceremony the staff had a party and celebrated the end of a hard year. After a few drinks, conversation turned to how terrible and stupid the students were and how silly the parents looked in fancy clothes. The chatter depressed me; I felt alienated from the group, as did several other teachers who cared about the children and had worked very hard all year. Those teachers and I, along with Judy and several other spouses and friends, went out later for a few drinks. We determined that the next year things would be different and better for the students. Then we told teaching tales, those funny, self-deprecating stories that teachers tell each other by way of recognition that they love their work.

My class for the next year was 6-7, the bottom rung of the sixth grade. It was smaller, with twenty-seven students, but presumably much more difficult to handle. Students were put in the class for one of the following reasons: they had failed in or been thrown out of other classes in the fifth grade; they were identified as having learning problems; they were Spanish-speaking and couldn't manage the English-only curriculum; they were older than other sixth-graders, having either started school late or been left back somewhere in their school career; or they had some history of violence and were in school on a form of probation. Most of them could barely

> to the drying up of the destructive vent. From all of which I am constrained to it as creative reading and to count it among the arts.
>
> First words must mean something to a child.
>
> First words must have intense meaning for a child. They must be part of his being.
>
> How much hangs on this love of reading, the instinctive inclination to hold a book *! Instinctive!* That's what it must be. The reaching out for a book needs to become an organic action, which can happen at this yet formative age. Pleasant words won't do. Respectable words won't do. They must be words organically tied up, organically born from the dynamic life itself. They must be words that are already part of the child's being.

The power of her children's writing didn't surprise me, as I had already discovered, through the work of the children in 6-1, the amazing range, variety, and complexity of young people's imaginative work. The specifics of Ashton-Warner's techniques weren't of interest to me at that time, though I've found successful ways to adapt them for older learners since. What she planted in my mind was the power of listening to your students, reading their work carefully, and learning what was important to them and to their community. I believe that her faith in five-year-olds could easily be extended to twelve-year-olds, and over my teaching life I have come to believe that it is never too late to learn and love learning, nor is it ever too late to rechannel the energy coming out of

the vents of destructiveness and open up the creative vents.

In another, equally important way Homer Lane, too, influenced me and confirmed the path I had set out on as a teacher. In his book *Talks to Parents and Teachers* (first published in 1928) Lane describes his work with young British delinquents at the Little Commonwealth, where he developed a student-governed democratic learning environment. The trial I had students conduct in my 6-1 class was influenced by this early experiment with student democracy. Homer Lane actually ran a whole living and learning community for young people on the basis of one person, one vote, himself included. Though this doesn't work well in a classroom with young children, Lane's experiment was a challenge, especially when it came to issues of discipline and the development of mutual respect and responsibility in a school or classroom setting.

These remarks by Lane stayed with me as I reflected upon the basis of my teaching after a few years in the classroom:

> Even confirmed anti-social tendencies in children may be released by educational methods. The energy occupied in destructive activities is always capable of being turned into social service. Harsh repressive methods will not do this, although the energy may sometimes by long confinement in a reformatory be subdued by fear. The problem of correction is, however, not one