

By Kim Marshall '69

Love, hate, change, and hope



in Grade 6g

In which Mr. Marshall gets his head together

Kim Marshall's account of his first year of teaching in a tough ghetto school, Law and Order in Grade 6c, appeared in the BULLETIN of September 20, 1970. It was a chronicle of failure, but Marshall's honesty and deep feeling for his students evoked wide response from our readers.

In his second year, Marshall tried an unconventional teaching method that changed the educational experience for both teacher and students. This is the story of that year.

Outside school at the end of a spring day, I notice a group of girls picking on a bespectacled, rather intellectual child that you could just guarantee would have a hard time in almost any school. One of her tormentors claims that this girl kicked her jumprope during gym class, and so she is going to "get her behind kicked" now. Her friends encourage her. They whop the girl on the back of the head when she is looking the other way, and scatter her books all over the sidewalk.

Knowing that it will not change the behavior of the bullies or make things any easier for the girl in the future, I intervene and escort her down the street. But the other girls follow and the leader runs up full tilt from behind and pushes the girl, glasses flying, knees scraping, flat onto her face. I whirl around, but it is too late to do anything at all. I have a sick, helpless feeling as I take the weeping girl back to school for a more efficient escort home.

I have the same feeling when, during a false fire alarm with lots of kids milling around the outside of the school, I smell burning fabric and find that someone has come up behind me with a cigarette and burned two holes through the pants of my new corduroy suit.

And there is a similar feeling when I receive a letter in response to my article in the September 1970 BULLETIN about my first (and very difficult) year of teaching:

Dear Sir:

Your article clearly shows that whites do NOT belong in Black schools. With all your woes and problems, you forget that the 25 Black students you "taught" have had

another year robbed from them (and people wonder why when they become adults they can't "make it" in society). It is unfortunate that you had to "gain your experience" by stealing 25 children's lives for a year. However Honky—your day will come!

Sincerely,

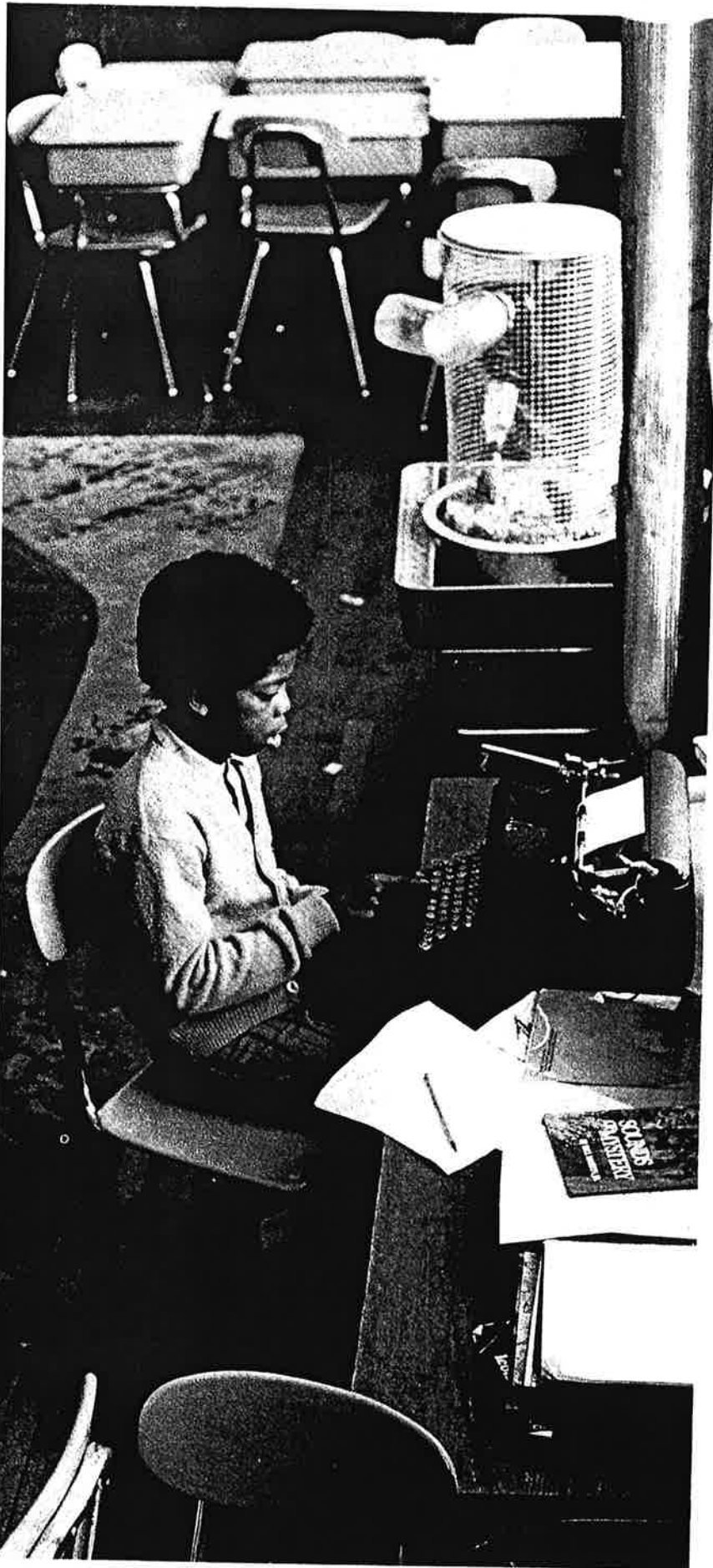
One Black who reads the Harvard Bulletin

These incidents represent the rocky bottom of my second year of teaching at the King School in Roxbury, showing the worst in the kids, and me at my most helpless and unprepared. But where this kind of thing was par for the course in my first year, it was unusual this last year. I think this was because I came in both toughened and prepared with some kind of competence with which to anticipate — rather than stand helplessly agape at — the problems of the school.

The summer before this last year began, I did two things: I wrote the BULLETIN article, which cleared my head of invented scapegoats and phony reasons why I had had such a bad first year. And I visited the Harvard-Newton Summer School. The school itself was innovative and teeming with good things, but what I got from it came from one talk with one man about a classroom system called Learning Stations. In different forms, it is being tried by many teachers around the country. With modifications, this is the system that made my second year of teaching a tremendous success in nearly every way.

I had a lot of other things going for me — knowing the school and the kids, greatly increased confidence (known as having my head together), a clearer idea of what I was doing — but without this very simple system I would have been beating my head against a wall most of the year trying to teach the old way, and I probably would not have survived it. Without the Learning Stations, the accusations contained in the letter quoted above would have taken on a haunting validity.

The basic idea is this: you put the desks in the classroom in groups of four or five rather than in rows. There are seven groups of desks, each one devoted to a subject — Math, English, Social Studies, Spelling, Creative Writing, General, and Reading — and at each group (or station), in a pocket on the side of one



of the desks, are thirty copies of a learning activity in that subject, which you write and run off on a duplicating machine. The main thing that the man in Newton (Warren Chafe of the Wayland Public Schools) taught me was that there is nothing very difficult in dreaming up stations and writing them up on duplicating masters. It is even easier when a group of teachers put their heads together. And there is nothing wrong with producing seven of these a day and using 850 sheets of paper a week.

For example, the Creative Writing Station might ask the kids to write about a time they were very scared. The Math might introduce division of fractions, give examples, and present twenty problems. The Spelling might ask them to look up words and put them into context. The General might be an exercise in separating facts from opinions. The English a drill in when to capitalize. The Reading a brief column about the hijacking of jetliners by Arab guerillas, followed by ten questions, objective and subjective. The Social Studies a series of questions leading the students to find their way around a map on the wall.

By any standards, the stations on any given day were a great deal of written work for a sixth grade class to do — perhaps three or four times as much as could be covered in most conventional classes — and they ranged from the most concrete to the most open-ended and affective.

Each student starts at his home desk (in which piles of finished stations accumulate until there is a clean-up campaign) and does that station, then gets up and moves to any other station and does that one; and so on until all seven are done. The only really firm rule in the class is that everyone finishes all seven stations by the end of the day. If kids finish early, they can go into a corner and read or just talk (later in the year we had three old typewriters and a game of checkers for this corner).

The station time usually ran for about two to two-and-a-half hours, from first thing in the morning until after recess. There was no formal beginning of the day; people just came in and started on the stations after they got settled down. I found it best to be very passive at the beginning of the day, and save all-class activities, which I would actively lead, until later. During the station time there was a lot of movement and talking and activity in the room (by no means all of it academic), and I was frantically busy running around the room trying to answer the questions and problems of all the kids who wanted me. I found this kind of teaching more exhausting than conventional lecturing. We seldom had discipline problems or confrontations or fights during this phase of the day, because everyone was involved in working or socializing. But when we did have problems, the class kept on functioning, running itself, while I dealt with them. At the end everyone handed in a manila folder of work, and I got it back to them the next morning with the work corrected and the grades put on a weekly grade sheet in the back of the folder. People who did not

finish all the stations often had to stay after school or do them the next day.

I amazed myself by making this system work to the satisfaction of the kids, the parents, the school administration, the Boston Public Schools and myself, for the entire year. Writing the stations took an hour or an hour-and-a-half: a stimulating afternoon's or evening's work that allowed me to pump every conceivable topic or interest into the classroom, while still covering all the basic skills in Math and English and Spelling. I gave the kids very conventional tests in these every Friday, and recorded them on a big chart on the wall that let them know exactly where they stood with respect to the sixth grade curriculum. Correcting folders of work became burdensome in the winter, but I found ways of making it easier, and kept it up with only a few lapses. The financial cost of the Learning Stations was not exorbitant (I bought my own duplicating masters and started buying my own paper when the school mysteriously ran out in February). All told, it cost barely more than the money I made on last year's BULLETIN article.

The real selling points of the system were: (1) the amazing amount of work that got done without anyone really feeling it, including lots of reading, writing, and practice in following directions; (2) the ability it bred in the kids to work things out for themselves, at their own speed (there are many educators who think things sink in much deeper when you do them yourself); (3) the way it freed me up to meet individual needs, both academic and personal, without interrupting the class; (4) the way it took the stage away from the "command performance" teacher and rebellious kids, and gave it to every individual in the room; (5) the way it allowed everyone to move and talk freely within the limits of a long-range responsibility to do the work, thus co-opting the kids' energy and restlessness; (6) the way it allowed kids to teach each other when I was busy or they didn't feel like talking to me (again, some educators feel kids learn better from their peers than from adults); (7) the freshness of the material, since it was written the night before; and (8) the way the oblique presentation of the material lifted the burdens of being a pedagogue from me and allowed me to relate to the kids on a more human level. In short, it was a system that made a hard-working school morning into a social, pleasant experience. Kids would come in first thing in the morning and ask, "Are we having stations today?" and were disappointed when occasionally we did not.

But when they asked this, they meant the atmosphere in the room *during* the station time as much as the Learning Stations themselves. For during this segment of the day they could relax and be themselves while doing their work. I did not try, in contrast to my first year of teaching, to impose a middle-class, adult ethos of silence, straight rows, and propriety on the kids. I knew from my own experience and from my observations around the school that such efforts to remake them would be strongly resisted, as was natural if the kids were to keep their integrity, and would ultimately fail because they did not pay the kids the essential compliment of taking them seriously as individuals.

During the Learning Station time they were able to

talk to one another as they did outside the school (with swearing somewhat curtailed), and so every day the community, with its problems and strengths, came into the classroom with them. They related to one another on their own terms, in their own way. They were themselves, and I accepted them for what they were. Because I did, they accepted me, and we liked each other (although not all the time!).

Many people say that if you let kids be themselves in school they will never get any work done because schoolwork is no fun, and there are subtly racist variations that say it is especially true in a tough black school. I found the opposite to be true. In this relaxed environment I was able to meet them half-way with the material they had to learn in school, and I found them really eager to do it. Presented obliquely through the Learning Stations, rather than being forced on them in conventional lecture classes, the work *was* fun, and whether they liked me or not that day didn't stop them from getting it done. They were more confident in coming to grips with the work (which was itself chattier and less threatening) because they were surrounded by friends who would help them, could get me to help them at any point, and were ensconced in an atmosphere which, because it was so relaxed and true to life, helped them to be less tense and have a higher opinion of themselves and their abilities.

And they worked their tails off, covering vast amounts of material and (although I cannot document this) making a lot of progress in learning the three Rs, and a lot more besides.

The stations lasted until about eleven in the morning. The rest of the day was partly taken up by other subjects (Art, Science, Music, Gym, Shop, Sewing, Cooking) taught by other teachers, and partly by a variety of activities in our room: games, typewriting, discussions, tests, reading the lyrics and listening to numerous rock songs from the Temptations to the Beatles, and occasionally going over stations that had caused difficulty or needed to be followed through in a conventional format. Despite occasional highlights in this part of the day, it was for the most part a disappointment and never came up to the frenetic, creative, friendly activity of the Learning Stations time. Most of the confrontations and fights and uptightness about noise in the room came in this rump section of the day. Basically both the kids and I felt we had done an honest day's work and just couldn't get very steamed up about doing much else. This coming year, I hope to introduce three new stations (Art, Science, and Free Reading) and expand the station time into the afternoon to solve this problem. But there will still be times every day when I will want to pull the class together and do some conventional teaching.

The Learning Stations were not Mr. Chafe's idea or that of any other single person. Many people have had a hand in adapting the "open classroom" concept that originated in the English primary schools in the 50's and 60's. The reasons the excellent concept has had to be adapted at all have to do with the age of the kids, the (legitimate) demands of the black community for

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conventional (3R) results from classrooms, the resistance of school administrations to noise and movement in classes unless it has a very concrete objective and can be defended in the light of conventional as well as innovative goals, and the absence of the many physical props ("stuff," the English call it—type-writers, games, animals, books, tape recorders, record players, fish, and so forth) that are needed to run a "pure" open classroom. In my case there was also my own temperamental resistance to a classroom that was less structured, without explicit challenges and demands on the kids, and in which there was not a substantial body of shared experience throughout the class.

At the beginning of the year I had a couple of weeks of getting to know the class and presenting a lot of very stimulating material in a conventional format to get their attention and respect; then I eased into the Learning Stations. The kids modified the system somewhat themselves; by Christmas they had stopped moving around from one station to another; instead they collected all their stations at the beginning of the day and sat at one group doing their work with their friends. This seemed reasonable, so I let it happen.

In February I had a period of dark doubt about the system. Was I merely giving out a series of busy-work worksheets, as a friend in the school cynically suggested? Was I really *teaching*, as some more conventional teachers asked behind my back when they saw the kids moving around the room and nearly all my blackboard space covered with posters, maps, and clippings from magazines? Why were my kids incapable of behaving well in the corridors and in some of their other classes? Were my comments and corrections being read the next morning? Were the kids using the system to fool around, were they taking it and me for granted? Was my material any good? Were they really *learning* anything? In a flurry of doubt I rearranged the desks into rows and tried to do more conventional teaching.

But as the crises and confrontations mounted, I quickly recalled why I had started the stations in the first place, and rediscovered their merits. For conventional teaching to me is just inefficient as well as being frustrating, exhausting, and unrewarding. Some teachers may be able to do it, but in my class conventional teaching can never match the diversity and intensity of activity of the stations, or allow the kids and me so much freedom and opportunity to talk to each other. I couldn't stand having to tell kids to sit down and be quiet when they came up in the middle of a class with a really interesting question on another subject, which they wanted answered right then. On top of all this, a friend walked into the room and said it looked like a bus with me in the driver's seat. That did it. I went back to groups and stations and chipped away at what seemed to be valid but marginal problems with a good system.

In a questionnaire I gave the class on the last day of school, all but one of the kids said they preferred stations to conventional teaching; most thought they had worked harder than in other classes, preferred Learning Station sheets to textbooks, thought I gave them enough help and more attention than other teachers. All but one said they had learned a lot

("alot, alot, alot" wrote one girl) and most thought the noise was all right, there were fewer fights than in other classes they had been in, and they liked being in the room rather than wanting to get out all the time. Most people thought they had learned to write better and had become more competent in the basics of Math and English. Almost everyone admitted that "a little" copying had gone on, but denied it was a big thing. And I believed them because there really was a kind of adventure in going around, getting the stations, and working them out yourself. In a major shift from surveys I did earlier in the year, only seven kids thought I was "not mean enough" while fifteen thought I was "about right" (no one thought I was "too mean"). To me this meant that many of the kids had shaken free of the deeply ingrained notion that a teacher has to be mean to be good.

The negative comments had to do with my laxity in giving and collecting homework, the fact that I didn't always make one girl do all her stations, and the fact that we did not have stations every day of the week.

Here is one testimonial, admittedly from one of my best students:

I think stations are good for kids to do. Because they learn more. And they are better than the way other teachers teach and you understand things more than in regular class. And I work harder than I ever had when I do the stations. But the harder the better for me. And I have learned a lot by stations and I think other kids have too. And I enjoy school now with stations because school seems better than before with stations. And it is a fun thing to do. I would change the desks around. And I would let the class be less noisy. And I would bring games and stuff to school when they are through with their work. And I would let the kids do Spelling every other week and I would learn them more about blacks and slavery.

And I hope your next year class would make you feel good by liking the station like we did. Mr. Marshall if your next year class do not like the stations still give them to them. Because later on in the year they will feel different about it like we did.

There were other things that made us feel good about the year: lots of Saturday field trips around Boston with small groups starting at the very beginning of the year, and two swimming trips in the last weeks of school; plastering the room with posters and getting it a "bad" reputation around the school (meaning groovy, as in "Hey Mr. Marshall, you got a *bad* room!"). But these things would have been tinsel without a workable system of day-by-day instruction in the room that flooded the kids with ideas and material and made both them and me happy. At the end of the year everybody was promoted to the 7th grade and nine kids were boosted into "academic" tracks (our class, 6G, was a "general" section). Although the system of tracking is something I would like to see changed, such boosts will greatly improve those nine kids' chances in the future.

All this gave me a peculiar image around the school. Like-minded colleagues kidded me about my optimism and eagerness in a school not imbued with either quality. Some people berated the "permissiveness" of the stations and suggested (always behind my back) that the kids were running all over me and

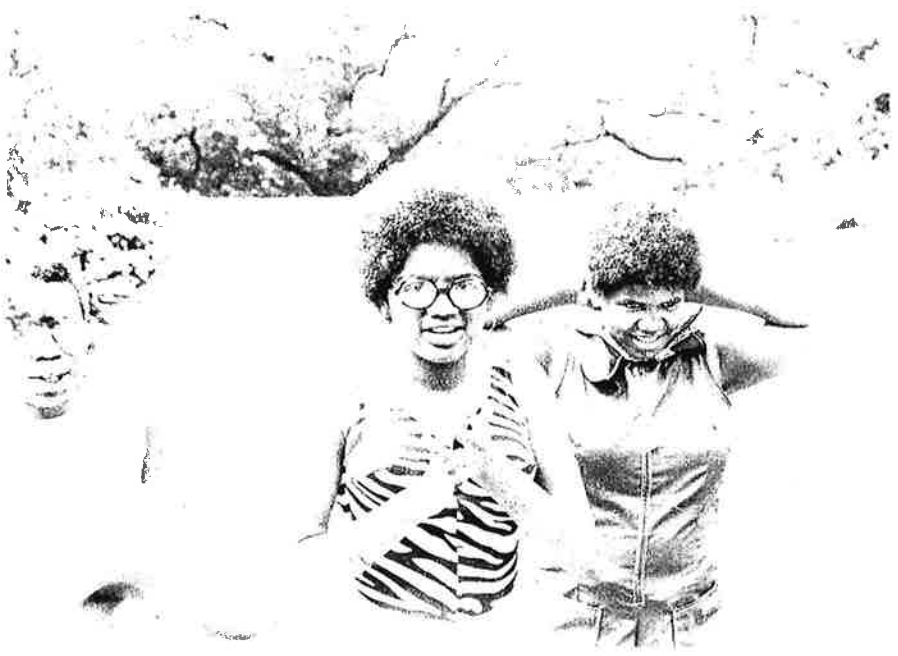


Faces from Grade 6g

Photographs by Kim Marshall

Faces
from Grade 6g





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I didn't know how to teach. In the course of the year I did not convert any other teachers to the Learning Station idea, although several were influenced by it; but then I hardly tried to proselytize, since I was concentrating on keeping my head low and proving to myself that the system could work.

Meanwhile the school as a whole had a hard year, with an unexpected change in administration, suspicions of plotting among the faculty, a class across the hall without a steady teacher for many months, intruders, and innumerable false fire alarms that emptied the school and violated the insularity of our classroom. Three friends I was driving to the school from Cambridge quit in the course of the year, all of them unable to stand the pressures put on them by the kids and the staff, two of them with fiery statements about the oppressiveness of the place. For the school there were many moments of great discouragement and uncertainty, and the sure knowledge that we were not successfully solving the problems of the kids because we had not even begun to solve our own problems and divisions. In this setting, happy and productive classrooms might seem isolated and futile, easily swallowed up in the next few years or perhaps earlier. But this didn't bother me very often. I became as present-oriented as the kids, and thoroughly enjoyed most days. This made it possible to face the bigger picture with some kind of optimism.

Still, having said all this, I haven't begun to tell about the year. Here are some stories.

I accuse a boy of talking when I am trying to get silence, and he says quite loudly, "You faggot!" I get hot and drag him outside the room and really browbeat and intimidate him: "Just what was that you called me?" Not in the least bit cowed, he replies, "I said *faggot*." I find it difficult not to admire his honesty and guts in not backing down, and discover that he was not talking and I had accused him falsely. What probably looked to him like a re-run of an old movie, with a trip to the office and a suspension the inevitable conclusion, turns into a very good talk about what we both did and why. Finally we both back down, and I ask him whether he will call me a faggot again. "I hope not," he says.

A boy from another room who was one of my worst headaches last year comes down the sixth grade corridor with fire in his eyes and grapples with one of my boys, biting him on the head. I tear them apart and chase the boy down the corridor, shouting after him, "We don't want you around here!" Like throwing memories of last year away — and like last year, I rip a muscle in my arm doing it. But my boys are impressed that I defended one of them.

In a disciplinary after-school session, the boy who called me a faggot says I don't like him and his friends because they're black. I hit back hard, calling it nonsense and proving it to their embarrassment (after all everyone else in the class is black, including my favorites). The fact that I get mad about the accusation, instead of taking a more typically white-liberal tack, impresses this boy. He finally allows as

how he doesn't really know how my mind functions.

A tense day. I get a lot of static from a superior about various things, and get in a bad argument with another colleague whom I should be working closely with. Stepping outside the school at the end of the day, I watch the kids file out into the misty, sunny warmth of the afternoon, and then wander down to the gate by the street and stand with another teacher and a group of kids, saying nothing. Some girls, one of them smoking a cigarette, are listening to the Jackson Five on a portable radio, and suddenly I am overcome with the peacefulness of the scene, the girls gently moving to the quiet, lyrical song, the misty afternoon. It is all so nice compared to the inside of the school. A magic moment.

On our Saturday field trips, it becomes a routine to climb up Blue Hill and then get lunch to go from the Howard Johnson at the bottom. This time we change that and decide to have lunch at a table inside. Things go pretty well, despite some stares from the completely white suburban clientele, until one boy shoots a paper wad through his straw at a kid across the table from him, misses, and hits a woman at the next table right above the eye. She storms over and demands to know whether I know what is going on (she might as well have asked whether or not I could *control* these children). Suddenly it is all like school again. I am pretty uptight for a while, because the kids naturally think the whole incident is hysterically funny. In retrospect I do too, but there is still a residue of something that makes me clutch at the whole thing, and separates me momentarily from the kids.

It looks like a bad morning with one boy right from the start: he comes in and props up the top of his desk with a ruler and hides behind it at the back of the room. The rest of the boys and I get into a discussion about Angela Davis, who was just caught by the F.B.I. the day before, and they get excited and pepper me with questions. Slowly the boy at the back of the room raises his head above the top of his desk. At the end of a dramatic sentence, he is leaning so hard on the top that the ruler snaps and the desk smashes shut with a climactic bang.

The same boy comes in another day in a real state. He takes all his stations and scribbles all over them, even though he is perfectly capable of doing the work. I get mad at him, reacting to what he is doing rather than why, and when I push a little too hard he swears at me and I drag him out of the room to take him to the office. Then he completely loses control, and for the first time I realize that something is deeply wrong, he was not just being naughty. It takes thirty minutes of solid work (who are you, where are you?), holding on to him and talking steadily, and finally he comes down. We spend a little more time in the room, and I let him go home, and we agree not to mention the incident to anyone. In the course of the year this boy makes tremendous progress. After a while, this kind of outburst doesn't happen at all.

Times when the whole class sits and reads in their song books the words of a song playing on the tape recorder, some of them quietly singing along. Although it isn't always this nice, this is a terribly

popular way of getting at a lot of good poetry and vocabulary, and I feel a major cultural accomplishment in completely breaking down their initial resistance to the songs of the Beatles; in the end they are among the favorites.

One or two people coming in with a chip on the shoulder can take me out of general circulation for the entire morning—although with the Learning Stations this is certainly better than the whole class grinding to a halt while an ugly confrontation works itself out. Next year I am going to take the suggestion of a friend and have a little sign that people (including the teacher) who got out of bed on the wrong side can hang around their necks: GET OFF MY BACK. We may need several.

I get into a big confrontation with a boy in another class at the water fountain, in which he heaps threats and insults upon me and I am coldly abusive right back. Suddenly I smile at him, he smiles back, and the impasse is broken.

Verbal sparring with a boy in my class. He suddenly says: "You know what I'd say to you if you weren't my teacher? I'd say 'Shut up'."

During a class discussion about the baby that was supposed to have been born to one of the passengers on the hijacked airliners in the middle of the desert, a boy pipes up from the back, "Did it come out of her mouth?"

On one of his more spaced-out days, a boy writes a poem that I later show the rest of the class. It catches everyone's imagination:

One day
I saw
a snake
on the wall
and mice
on my bed
and saw
bats
at my
window
and all
of a sudden
a king snake
wrapped around
my neck
and I
was
gone
gone
gone

During the station time, the demand for my help is often overwhelming—screches of "Mr. Marshall!" and girls sulking when I can't get to them soon enough. It's great, because most people get their question answered just when it is ripe in the mind, but I am usually exhausted by eleven in the morning.

New friendships blossom out of nowhere, and kids blossom with them. Sometimes they just sit and enjoy each other; other times there are intense working relationships, turning out pages of writing in tandem.

A white man running a light show in the auditorium insists to the kids that black is not a color, but the absence of color, whereas white is the combination of all colors. This is true for light, but not for pigments; the kids don't know this, and turn icy cold. When we get back to the room I explain this and

we have a big talk about whether the man was a racist.

A substitute teacher, green as can be and reminding me very much of myself at the beginning of last year, is asked to cover an eighth grade class in my room. My kids are at Science, and I choose to stay to prevent possible destruction. I witness a painful scene as he tries to do something ("Now boys" . . . gritting his teeth as they ignore him, taunt him, play games). He goes through that pain and embarrassment, no doubt augmented by my presence, that leads inevitably to a serious examination of what you are doing there, what you can do with the kids, and how to get yourself prepared before the next time you come in.

I announce that I'm going to keep a boy after school when he knows that I don't have the proper legal backing to do it (three checks in my little black book), and he flies into a rage of self-righteous fury. The other boys join him, and just before I finally back down, one of them says, "That's what gets me so mad about this school. I swear, when I grow up I'm going to blow up this school. Just wait till I get to college!"

Talking to our nominee for the Student Council about his big speech, I suggest that he come out in favor of getting a mural painted on the side of the school, since there are several blank brick walls three stories high. He thinks about this for a moment with a frown, then says, "But this is a *school*." This is one of the most militant boys in the class, but when thrust into the role of running for Student Council, he embraces a familiar morality.

Deadpan, one boy says, "You like me, don't you Mr. Marshall?" and I have to crack up. He repeats this every few weeks, interspersed with, "You hate me, don't you?"

A hectic day in school, complete with a bomb scare, ends in a large mob scene outside with several kids trying to get two girls in my room to fight. They just don't want to, but kind of enjoy the fact that they are the center of attention in a crowd of 150 and play along. As things are about to get serious, I wade in and drag one of the girls out, followed by the entire crowd, and get hit by a rock.

A black poet speaks to an assembly of sixth graders. He is low key and there isn't enough amplification to get his voice out to them, and they don't especially dig him. The hall is noisy and squirmy, and the teachers are walking up and down the aisles browbeating kids and dragging out "troublemakers." The poet starts talking about how black people should get their thing together and not do this kind of thing in front of white people—a good point, but one that really puts us on the spot in an unfair way. Besides, most of the kids don't hear it and those who do are a little embarrassed.

A girl playing her first game of chess looks around the board at all the unfamiliar enemy pieces and says, "Mr. Marshall, I feel scared playing this game."

Every few weeks we get "sidetracked" into a tremendous discussion about some issue—the trial of Angela Davis, space exploration, Vietnam, nuclear war, submarines, and so forth. But I hardly see them as red herrings; the mood for this kind of thing, when

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kids will listen to me and one another and really get excited about a topic, only jells every once in a while. When it does, I seize it. (In between these flashy side orders, the meat and potatoes get eaten in large quantities.) Sometimes during one of these digressions, I will launch into a description of something, and every kid will be rapt, completely silent, drinking up every word. Quite a different form of silence than that got by browbeating and shouting.

Decorating the room for Christmas, the girls all sprinkle little silver threads of tinsel in their hair and it looks beautiful, like jewelry, intertwined in their Afros.

One day, the same girl who wrote the “testimonial” I quoted earlier writes “I hate you” at the top of every one of her stations.

Days when the mood hits all of us and we are laughing and smiling and winking together.

One boy says of the King School, “I feel like I’m in a sardine can, and at the end of the day someone opens it.”

A little blue-eyed white girl from Indiana, who was in the class for about two weeks before her mother yanked her out, comes up and tells me that when she was studying for her Social Studies test she forgot what NAACP stood for and so called a friend of her family’s who knows Huey Newton and asked him and then studied for her test the rest of the night. She is from another planet, and I can’t handle the disparity between her and the other kids (neither can they; the next day she is deliberately tripped in the corridor, and there is a big crisis). Breaking up a rash of vicious fights in the room, I feel her eyes on me, like myself at twelve years old looking at myself now, stirring very mixed emotions.

With the Boston Supervisor in the room on a crucial grading visit, a boy asks in a very audible voice, “Mr. Marshall, what’s a homosexual?” Somehow I give him a straight reply while the supervisor eyes us both. During the year there are hundreds of questions coming out of nowhere, on every subject from Angela Davis to the origins of the moon — and it is a delight to have the freedom to deal with them right away.

As I break up a boy-girl fight the girl’s leather coat gets a massive tear in the armpit and she announces, “You’re going to sew that up, Mr. Marshall!”

A boy says, “I wish I was dead so I could come back and haunt people.”

On a stuffy and very tense day, the entire school is crammed into the auditorium for a film on dental health. It seems a guaranteed bust, especially with rumors flying around the school about a walkout in sympathy with a city-wide high school boycott. But then they turn on the film and everyone watches in rapt silence. The reason: a gorgeous black girl is the subject of the film’s exhortations to brush right and see a dentist, and everyone sits and gazes at her for half an hour.

I drag a boy in my class off a little kid he is pummeling. He loses his temper and throws a chair at me. I fend it off, get rid of the other kids who were waiting to go to Music, and shout at the boy that he may have two assault charges against him, one from me and one from the other boy’s parents. That

subdues him a little, but he collects himself and says that he has been meaning to have a talk with me for a long time about how I am running the class, but now it is too late since he is about to leave Boston. I tell him to say what he has to say anyway, and he tells me that I am not mean enough, that I should have clamped down on him and his friends when they talked in class, should have suspended them and so forth. But now, since I wasn’t tough at the beginning, they laugh when I get mad and don’t do their work. He says that if I had a real talk with the class, I would find that most everyone else felt the same way about me, although they didn’t want to come right out and say it. He says that the way I get the class together was no way at all, and I didn’t get down to any *real* teaching.

I retort that I think the Learning Stations are a better form of teaching and are working fine except for about seven people who are going through a bad spell — but then, aren’t there that many who don’t work hard in other classes? Besides, I continue, I am not a mean person inside and can’t function that way, so if I tried to act that way it wouldn’t be real and people would know it. He acknowledges that if I did that now people would only say I was trying to “act big” and it wouldn’t change things.

I then surprise myself by going into a thing about how I didn’t come into the school to shout at kids, to get kids in trouble and all that, but to help them learn, and I think they are learning more here. Then I ask him what he thinks can be done to improve the situation, and he says scornfully that it is really too late and about all I can do for the rest of the year is to keep bringing in interesting work.

One boy in the class has a real knack for relating to his contemporaries. He keeps picking on girls who have big eighth-grade brothers, cousins, or boy-friends, and most of the year he is being pursued by three separate people, each one ready to beat him to a pulp for some outrage to a maiden. Early in the year he *is* seriously beaten and nearly loses the sight in one eye, but this doesn’t teach him anything. For weeks at a time he doesn’t dare go to lunch and lurks around the corridors hiding behind the lapel of his jacket. Some people might say he is only trying to attract attention. What a way to do it!

A new teacher comes into the class across the hall from mine while I am in one of my low spells, and his enthusiasm and belief that things can be changed makes me feel like a cynical old man.

On my birthday, the girls have a colleague of mine lure me out of the room and then, after fifteen minutes, call me back to “break up a fight.” The room is darkened, and they all jump up and scream “Happy Birthday” and turn on the lights, and there are Cokes and potato chips and napkins on the desks, the floor is all swept up, and one blackboard is covered with a couple of ego-boosting inscriptions.

The great storyteller of the class gets that gleam in his eye and spends ten minutes telling and acting out a time in his elementary school when a teacher scared him and he pulled a knife on him. He tells the tale with finesse and perspective, as though he understands everyone’s role in the situation; himself, cornered holding an illegal knife; the teacher, uptight,

Creative writing from Grade 6g

On best friends

I have a friend called Angel. She is my best friend. She's like a sister to me and I am like a sister to her. And we wear each other's clothes and shoes and earrings and other things. We share things and when one of us does not have what the other one has we cut it in half and half and share it. And we never have a fight. That is what a good friend is and I can always count on her when I need her. And she can always count on me. So she's happy and I'm happy so we both are happy. And I am glad.

Being frightened

Once upon a time in the nineteenth century I was laying down just about to go to sleep when I heard a foot step. Thump, thump, thump and I looked up and saw Frankenstein and died.

One day I was walking down the forest and all of a sudden I got tired so I lay down and when I awoke I saw a witch house with bats and animals and monsters so I was so frightened that I ran and ran and ran and all of a sudden I was in the beautiful forest and I was getting up from the ground. Then I knew I had a bad dream so I was happy again and never leave the house without my mother's permission.

Being sad

When I am mad I don't want anybody to jump on my back because I will off them. I do not play because it might be serious. When I am happy I let it all hang out; the old saying, Smile and the world will smile with you.

What we want to happen

I would like to be 13 and when I am thirteen I want to be 14 and I'll keep going on higher in age until I get to 21, and when I'm 21 I'll bet you I wish I was 13 again.

Letters to the President

Dear Mr. Nixon,

I am going to talk about drugs today and how to prevent *dope* from young and old people. One way is to have all your policemen and women to go around turning houses upside down looking for pills and stuff and if they need any pills to lose weight, or gain weight, or to get better from sickness give them *shots*.

Dear Mr. Nixon,

We need better schools and houses and churches. Someone needs to stop air pollution. Take cars out and bring horses back in. Help the people over in Biafra. Send them food, money, clothing and care.

You should be ashamed of yourself.

Dear Mr. Nixon,

You should stop the war in Vietnam and make a better school and better and brighter lights and paint the rooms different colors and stop the smuggling of drugs and then they cannot buy any drugs and the head man cannot sell it.

About the King School

I go to the King School across the street from my house. I go to gym Monday and Wednesday and we have fun. The kids are nice but bad. I have friends that I met here and old friends that I already knew. I just hate those teachers always making noise. They talk talk talk more than we do. But lunch time is my best time because I like food, but the beans gotta go. And my friends hate those beans too. And we really get mad and we can't have cake when it is our time to get up. They always say the rest is for the second period. And some of the food we have is: tuna, fish, hot dog, cake, jello.

The ideal house

I would like to live in a house by myself and I would like to have the teacher for my slave and I would like to give him a penny a week. That is all.

Love

When you care
about someone
and love them
and when he
is sad
you make
him happy
and you go
out on dates
and kiss
and have children
and then get
married.

A poem

My hair is nappy
My soul is happy
I'm black and I'm proud

Death

When you die you go in a dream for one hundred years and then you get a look at the world hundred years later and you see how the world has changed and the kind of car that goes to the moon and you get to see your great grandson but you can not talk to him and if you touch him he will not feel it and in the end you go back in the ground and go back in a sleep for a very long time.

embarrassed, trying to get the knife away from him; the principal, fussing around, not knowing *what* to do.

I am detained in the office one morning and arrive in the class twenty minutes late. When I come in there is total silence for twenty minutes as they start their stations, and a very nice, subdued morning after that. For once they are not taking me for granted, which at that point suits me fine.

The girls drive me as close to angry, hurt tears as you can get without having them streaming all over your cheeks. We have a long talk about what happened and how it affects us. In the end there is a stirring, and one of them says, "Mr. Marshall, we're sorry." I say, "You'd better watch it or I'll start crying again." All the heads whip around because my previous moistness had been unofficial and un-

admitted, and one of the girls says, "Let's get out of here, I don't want to get flooded."

A group of three boys starts coming up to the room a half hour early in the morning to talk and get a head start on their work. Although I'm usually very busy, it's a good feeling having them there, especially since they are the kids that other teachers see as being the toughest and most alienated.

Every once in a while things get very physical with this group of boys: wrestling, jumping on me, fooling around outside the school. As one sympathetic teacher put it, they have a pretty funny way of showing affection. But other teachers see it as kids running all over me, and sometimes when the boys get too excited I wonder myself whether or not I have created a monster. But these are the boys I am closest to.

Love, hate, change, and hope in Grade 6g

who like me the best, who will say at the drop of a hat that I am the best teacher they ever had. They love having someone who pays this much attention to them, takes them on trips, laughs at them, plays with them. In this kind of relationship there is necessarily a lot of horsing around, and it is frustrating when others don't understand this.

On a day for which I had done absolutely no preparation because of a good movie the night before, I plop down a magazine with a play in front of everyone, and without any direction from me the class divides up into groups and starts to read it. They assign parts (which I can never do), correct each other's reading, the works. Some people go off by themselves and take old tests again, or read or play with the typewriter. And so it goes for the whole morning. I love it, but realize that it can't happen every day, and come in the next day with a full load of stations.

I sit on a tack that has been carefully placed on my chair, and just about lose my marbles — counting to ten out loud, and then facing the old situation of not being able to prove that the person I *think* did it actually did; so I boil over inside. At the time it seems like the absolute nadir of the year, but it is actually an isolated thing in the middle of a very good stretch. The suspect subsequently apologizes and makes amends.

Kids who want to sneak by me in the corridor to get to another room hide behind the lapels of their jackets, as though if they can't see me, I can't see them. One time a boy who is furious with me for putting him on detention shouts from outside the school, "You --- jerk!" from the depths of his overcoat.

A kid who, after a whole year of turning his head away from Math in frustration, tries like crazy for a whole marking period and gets a straight A on his report card. He keeps all his A and A+ papers in a clean manila folder and takes them home to his mother at the end, his head bursting.

One day in May, afflicted with bronchitis, I manage to get through an entire day without speaking a single word, which must be some kind of a record. I write the kids a little letter at the beginning of the day, and we make do very well. Perhaps this wouldn't be as easy in a classroom more dependent on a teacher's vocal cords.

A boy returns from a suspension of three days and on his first day back throws a fresh, wet piece of bubble gum into his reading teacher's hair. She has to cut a whole bunch of hair off to get it out. He insists, and probably firmly believes, that it "slipped" out of his hand.

Horsing around with some boys outside after school, I get my glasses knocked off. I catch them and look up, and the boys have all taken a step back and are inspecting the new and unfamiliar face. After a while they decide they like it better that way, although it takes some getting used to. "Look at that nose!" says one. "Get that profile." They are so excited with playing around that we have to slam the school door in their faces to get them to go home.

Driving back from a trip to a suburban bakery in a bus, we pass a place near Blue Hill where a group

of girls and I came on a field trip earlier in the year. I turn to one of them and ask her whether she remembers coming out here. For some reason there is a lull in conversation in the bus at that moment. Everyone hears the question and looks out the window of the bus. There is only thick, inviting forest. The ensuing uproar probably elicits one of the deepest shades of red of the year.

Towards the end of the year, I fish up three old manual typewriters from friends, family, and a typewriter store, and install them in the room. They are in use every minute of the day. Some people play them like a musical instrument or a set of drums, but most of them earnestly hunt-and-peck out their Creative Writing or some other project, delighting at the neatness of their writing. The typewriters have a remarkable stabilizing effect on the room, especially when people are getting finished with their stations.

After the umpteenth welfare insult is hurled across the room ("Your mother eats welfare chopped meat!" and "He wears hand-me-down drawers!" and "Your clothes come from Goodwill!") and a fight nearly explodes, I sit everyone down and give them a tough talk about how most people on welfare are old and disabled and can't work, and how their insults to each other are remarkably similar to the kind of thing that white racists have been saying about black people for a couple of centuries. They are momentarily impressed by the conviction in my voice, but the attitudes are deeply ingrained. Any conservative Congressman who thinks there is a welfare ethos among the young in Roxbury should come and listen to a few conversations on the subject in the King School: nowhere can you hear a fiercer rejection of the idea of welfare.

Talking one day after school, a couple of young like-minded colleagues and I discover that we have all been doing exactly the same thing to the older, more conventional teachers in the school that we got so mad about them doing to us: that is, forming judgments and making comments about their teaching just from walking by their classes, talking about them behind their backs without any real information about them or their ideas or abilities. Everyone in the school has very sketchy ideas about how other teachers are doing — none of them very fair, since no one observes anyone else's classes.

Sometimes the boys' drumming on their desks with sticks, pencils, and fingers rises to a deafening crescendo and drives the rest of us batty.

Over the months I am overly protective of a little boy in the class who is being victimized by two bigger boys. This feeds the notion that he is my pet and unable to take care of himself — which is why they were picking on him in the first place. But how can I get out of that bag? Let them beat him up?

The very best days have a way of following the very worst ones. Perhaps surviving the worst is a one-day ticket to respect and affection.

The girls are shy in communicating their flattery. In June I find a little note on the piece of plywood covering the broken window on the door: "Mr. Marshall is a good guy." On other occasions in

other places: "Sexy dexy Marshall," "You been a good teacher," and "Mr. Marshall, Room 323, is a handsome dude."

Returning from lunch, I find that two disgruntled girls have been up and emptied two filing drawers of old papers onto the floor and torn down a couple of posters. As in other such cases, there is nothing to do but pick up the pieces and feel sorry that it had to happen. Because of a major crisis later in the day, I never do get to talk to the suspects.

A vicious fight between two girls over an alleged slur about the way one smelled. They fly at each other in their sewing class, and again two more times in the corridor. That afternoon the two girls and their parents convene in our room, and for the first and only time in the year, we talk the whole thing out to absolutely everybody's satisfaction.

Breaking up a fight between two big girls in the corridor, I very nearly get bitten. A few minutes later a colleague points out a small tuft of black hair caught on one of the buttons of my shirt.

A great swimming trip at the end of the year, with a climb to the top of Blue Hill to top it off. Everyone has a ball, and driving them back to Roxbury in a borrowed VW bus, there is lots of eager chatter and cute little things like "Oh Mr. Marshall, you're so sweet to take us to the beach tomorrow." Then the radio comes on with *Want Ad*, and within two bars the entire crew of eleven girls has picked it up and is singing it in tune, word-perfect, right to the end. Like a sweet traveling choir.

An accident-prone boy has a particularly bad time with one girl. One day she bites him and draws blood. The next he slugs her and breaks two of his own fingers.

Several people talk for the last two months of school about how they are going to "kick my behind" on the last day, and I had better not be there. To which I reply that they will have to stand in line because there are a lot of other people who want to do the same thing. Somehow none of us remembers the rendezvous when the end does come.

In a six-hour marathon session in a darkroom, I produce a good 8x10 black and white picture of everyone in the class, and present them to each kid on the last day of school. Only one boy tears his up. Also on the last day I read out a series of positive comments about each kid that I had been compiling for some weeks, a kind of citation of all the things that made that person special during the year. They like that and listen, but the pictures probably accomplish the same objective with twenty times the impact.

Our party on the last day tells me we have come a long way. People play records and sit around quietly talking to each other. A peaceful and beautiful scene.

A dejected colleague and I talk about the way the kids go charging up the stairs every morning the second after the bell rings to open school, racing to get to their classrooms, and he wonders, "Why are they in such a hurry? They know what's up there!" Yet I later discover that he has missed the point. They do know what's up there — friends, fun, excitement, watching teachers act out old dramas with new personalities, crises, fire alarms, fights, love affairs, and occasionally academic learning. In short, the secret of the kids in the King School (and the liberals will be the last ones to find this out) is that they



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love school. It's a gas. It's where all the action is and they wouldn't be anyplace else.

But even though the kids have found ways to have a ball in school, some would say that they are already "dead," that their personalities are permanently scarred and twisted by their experiences in the public schools (Jonathan Kozol's book, *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools* is the prototype). These critics say that the schools are keeping kids down by not preparing them for a competitive society, and thus *are* preparing them for their "places" in a racist society. According to them, the kids' merriment is laughter on a sinking ship.

Teachers who agree with this indictment have by and large avoided or dropped out of the public schools. They see change within them as impossible, and feel that by teaching in them they would be helping to prop up institutions whose downfall would be a boon to education. Some of these people have gone on to establish or teach in alternative schools outside the public schools.

My reaction to this indictment has been somewhat different: I thought it naive to hope for the downfall of the public schools and to think that alternative schools will ever have much impact on the system or educate more than a handful of fortunate kids. So I felt some justification in teaching within the system, hoping that it would be more receptive to change than the critics charged.

I have also come to disagree with some critics' contention that the kids are "dead." When I first began to teach in the King School, I was influenced by this position, and I approached the kids with a certain amount of liberal pity. But over the last two years I have found that these kids don't need or want pity. There is nothing pathetic in their fierce independence, flashing intuition, and hard-won ability to deal with their very tough environment. The students I have had come through the same elementary schools that Kozol wrote about, supposedly having their hearts and minds destroyed by the vicious racism of the Boston Public Schools. Yet here they are, full of life, their hearts and minds belonging only to them, every one of them yearning, reaching out to be someone. Far from being dead, I have found them eager and full of potential, endearingly alive.

But I can see how the kids' environment and experiences in public schools have built up a very effective resistance to conventional teaching by conventional teachers with conventional materials, making success with these methods and materials an act of genius (and there is a chronic shortage of geniuses). The kids have developed a style — some would say a culture — that protects them and helps them feel better about themselves, while the school spends much of its time trying to *undo* that style and remake the kids in another image. Both sides see their integrity as being at stake. Most of the kids are not about to be remade, while the school insists that it can't begin to do its job of teaching the kids until there is "discipline" on its own terms.

But in the ensuing struggle for order in the school, the kids hold nearly all the advantages (especially with the abolition of corporal punishment and the growing awareness in the black community of legal procedures). Victory for the school, usually in the form of silence in a classroom or an assembly, is a purely neutral educational accomplishment. At this point the kids have usually retired deep into shells of self-protection and fantasy.

So while the kids want to learn and the school sincerely wants to teach them, for all but a few there is little effective preparation, academic or otherwise, for the rigors of high schools, colleges, and the job market. While they are far from "dead" now, I can see how many kids in the King School may have a "death sentence" in American society, as unemployment, drugs, and crime lurk ahead.

To lift that 'sentence,' or at least put it on appeal, schools like the King must approach the kids in a different way. They must accept the kids' style or culture as a natural and necessary response to their environment, and start from *there* in dealing with their problems and teaching them what they need to know. The Learning Station classroom may be the beginning of a way to do this; there are other ways being tried by other teachers around the country. No one has hard facts and figures to prove that the new approaches really produce results. At this point there is only subjective evidence like this article. But the facts and figures may not be far away (I plan to do thorough before-and-after testing on my class next year), and the new systems will be developed and slowly spread through public schools by a process of demonstration and persuasion.

One reason for optimism, and one thing that impressed me last year, is the receptiveness of parents and school administrators to a classroom system that involves the kids and makes them happy *while* they cover the traditional skills. More and more people realize that the authoritarian, conventional classroom, even when it works without disruption, is just not producing results. The totally unstructured classroom is also somewhat discredited by what many parents and schools see as its lack of purpose and direction. But a compromise somewhere between these two extremes may find a surprising amount of support. It certainly did in my case.

Perhaps it is naive to think that revolutionizing classroom teaching in the public schools will give the kids a better grasp of the basic skills, or (if they grasp those skills) that they will be any better off in high schools and colleges, or (if they do better there) that the job market will accept them or even have room for them (the unemployment figure in Roxbury is currently 20 percent). Looking at things this way can be pretty discouraging. There is so much work to be done at so many levels, and schools are the lowest and most microcosmic level. But when I think about another class this year — the new faces, the many new ideas I want to try — I can push aside such thoughts and plunge in, while America tries to decide whether it can and will give these kids a chance.