Public School 65, Down on the Lower East Side

Lou LaBrant

The Editors extend our best wishes to Dr. LaBrant who celebrates her 100th birthday in May.

When it was suggested that I write a short piece for this magazine it was also suggested that it might be about some teaching experience I enjoy recalling. I taught for most of my working days, taking time out for a short shift as a private secretary and a few years for rest and travel. I enjoyed all of it. A former student suggested the above topic, and so be it.

From the fall of 1942 to June of 1953 I was a professor of English education at New York University. One of my duties was to see that those of our students who wanted to teach in the New York City system met the English requirements for that employment. I found, however, that those requirements seemed to me inadequate for those who already spoke the language clearly but needed a richer background. (The speech department was responsible for seeing that speech defects and foreign accents were taken care of.) The city required that the prospective teacher have a major in English and at least a year of graduate work. It also demanded nine weeks of work as a practice teacher, supervised by a university teacher who would visit the student three times and make sure that the work was satisfactory. I found that the neophyte usually knew when the supervisor would visit, and that sometimes the lesson was a repeat of one that had gone on before. Students are not perfect.

I required my students to serve as student teachers an entire semester, thus taking part in enrollment, giving final examinations, and deciding on grades. Their preparation should have included a reading ability of one Germanic and one Latin language, since English is an amalgam of the two streams of linguistic growth. Teachers need more background information than they propose to ask for, but they also need to be prepared for as many extra experiences as possible. Pupils ask many unexpected questions. (Usually my students chose as foreign language study German and French, but sometimes Old English or Spanish were chosen. A few Italians substituted that language.) Our department asked for two other courses: "The Nature of Literature, taught by Dr. Louise Rosenblatt, and my course "The Nature of Language" (Semiotics).

A final requirement was a year's work in Educational Psychology, a course which would make the student aware of the effect that words have on one's emotions and thinking. For example, the word "Negro" calls attention to color that "Indian" or "European" do not.

The city permitted only one student teacher of a given subject in any high school, and since N.Y.U. required a minimum of six students to constitute a professor's class, a supervisor had to make eighteen trips for each class of student teachers. A man who understood this, a requirement that prevented me from visiting my students, and who also knew of their extra preparation, told the board that I should be allowed to take a whole class of six to one school. The board agreed and sent a notice of this special privilege to the high school principals of the city. As a result, I received many invitations to bring such a group to the principal's school. I chose P.S. 65, a junior high school on the Lower East Side, known as one of the worst slum areas in the city. I had several reasons.

The school was two years below the norm in reading, according to the latest all-city testing. The principal was interested in experimenting. The location of the school would make it impossible for anyone to reject our results on the grounds that the neighborhood was superior, and that my program wouldn't work in a less privileged area. (I had met this attitude several times when I spoke about our results in the laboratory school at Ohio State University.) I chose six of my best graduate students and took them to P.S. 65.

My first request was that they make an assessment of the situation from the standpoint of reading. Following are their findings (in my wording):

1. Although born and reared in the city, these youngsters had never seen Macy's famous store, nor Fifth Avenue with its Empire State Building, Rockefeller Center, and the beautiful Central Park. They were in the city but not really of it. They knew only their own area and perhaps China Town and the shadows under one of the Brooklyn bridges.
2. These children lived in apartments where the main room served as

kitchen, dining room, living room, and sometimes bedroom.

3. There were neither books nor magazines in their homes. Names of authors on the card catalogue meant nothing to them.

4. Their homes were poorly lighted.

5. A national survey had shown that junior high school students enjoyed books about dogs and horses. These children, however, knew horses as the steeds for mounted police, and dogs as pets of wealthy people who had leisure to walk their pets or had money to hire servants to do this. The youngsters in P.S. 65 had carrier pigeons, birds that roosted on the rooftops.

6. Teachers did not welcome an assignment to the area and within ten minutes after the final gong were on their way to the subway to avoid the five o'clock rush.

Withers Building, Winthrop College; Museum of Education Archives, University of South Carolina

The program my students worked out was as follows:

A) The children would be taken on a bus ride to see the city. School buses were available.

B) The principal had already told them about the Broadway stars who had come from the Lower East Side. He would continue, and let them practice the school yell he had written:

P.S., P.S. 65
Down, down, down
On the Lower East Side

This would resemble the school yells of more prosperous schools, schools that had active sports teams. (P.S. 65 had no playground.)

C) Librarians would put books on two large tables, so that the youngsters could examine them, perhaps reading enough to test the sort of story in one they considered. One or two of my students would stay with the books to help with selection.

D) No written book reports would be required.

E) My students would stay after school to assist with possible programs or other simple activities the youngsters enjoyed. School was to become a pleasant place.

One of my girls even helped the girl students to hem their skirts or make minor changes in the cheap garments they bought from push carts. This simple program did not depend on the theories about word count, word recognition, left-handedness, or any of the educational fads then popular. At the end of the term, the city administered the reading test again. P.S. 65 had risen from two years below to two years above the average. A gain of four years in one made the youngsters proud, for the first time on the basis of educational progress.

I was sixty-five that spring, retirement age in New York City at that time. I do not know the sequel to my story; but I do remember with pleasure the smiling faces of the young readers at P.S. 65.

As for my students, that is their own story. They were bright, young, and serious about their work. If I listed them, I think some of their names might be familiar. They learned not from advice, but from responsibility.

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