Visit to a '600 School'

New York's special schools for problem children combine careful supervision with human warmth in an effort to reclaim those who have become a threat to society.

By GERTRUDE SAMUELS

THE problem children of this city —an estimated 1 per cent of the total school population of 1,000,000—have focused attention on New York's "600 schools" for maladjusted boys.

There are five of these day schools in New York City, so named because of their numerical grouping: Public Schools 612 and 614 in Manhattan, 611 in the Bronx, 613 in Brooklyn and 611 in Queens. They are small, specialized schools with a total of 1,200 pupils ranging in age from 9 to 16 years. Now, because of the growing challenge to the community that emotionally disturbed and disruptive children in the public schools present, the Board of Education is planning to open four more such schools in the immediate future, and two additional ones in the fall. They will provide for another 1,500 pupils.

Many principals have long opposed separate facilities for their incorrigibles, because (1) they feel that committing a youngster to a "school for delinquents" outside his home community stigmatizes him and complicates his return to normal community life, and (2) they believe that, given the funds and facilities, the regular schools can rehabilitate those children who, in the words of one principal, "are a challenge and trust to all devoted teachers."

Other principals support the idea of these special schools. They believe that teachers should not be expected to be psychiatrists, social workers, substitute fathers or policemen inside the classroom, and that disrupters can best be helped by specialists away from the permissive environments of the regular schools.

Whatever the pros and cons, the fact is that the school budget has never been able to provide the tools for rehabilitation inside the regular schools. Today the school board must, as a result, handle an emergency situation with emergency measures. Thus the plan to expand the 600-school program.

A little more than ten years ago, the experiment with these five schools was started for boys who presented "grave emotional and behavior problems, for whom current procedures in the elementary or junior high schools have been unsuccessful." The experiment had both a practical and idealistic base: to separate disturbed youngsters from the regular stream of pupils to whom they were a menace, and to try to make good citizens of them on the premise that all children are our most precious human reserve.

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IN the heart of Manhattan, on East Eighty-seventh and Eighty-eighth Streets, between Park and Lexington Avenues, is Public School 612, a modest yellow and brown brick schoolhouse, eighty-eight years old, but scrupulously clean. Its twin, five-story buildings, connected by a bridge, have views of fashionable apartment houses; a small outdoor play area is surrounded by a high wall. The school has a register of 300 boys, of whom there is an actual daily attendance of about 250 (the others are at clinics, applying for working papers, or may be ill or truants).

The boys come from many parts of Manhattan and are of all sizes, creeds and colors, but one thing they all have in common: they are here because they have proved so seriously maladjusted that they have literally been given up by their former schools. About 28 per cent of the boys were court cases before they came to P. S. 612. The referral dossier on one 15-year-old is typical:

> Violent temper. Involvement in stabbing out of school. Threw shoe at gym teacher. Attacked several teachers. Very dangerous to keep in school as he cannot control himself. Quiet for a time and then seems "to lose his mind." Does no work. Restless. Uses profane language to teachers. Disrupts assembly.

ALMOST to a boy, the youngsters come from deprived backgrounds. They are deprived economically, living in the slum areas of the city; they are deprived emotionally, rejected or deserted by one or both parents, who are often themselves disturbed personalities. By academic standards, their intelligence is generally below average. Ostensibly they are a threat to any community.

And yet, this reporter had a hard time reconciling this knowledge with the realities inside the school. For the impression one receives in visiting classes and talking with teachers and pupils is the remarkable extent of personal dignity in this school and the total absence of fear.

The social climate derives, in part, from the discipline, guidance and other procedures that are standard practice in all five 600 schools. The children are carefully supervised—at class or shop work, at assemblies, passing between classes, having lunch, playing in the yard, and on their way to their subways or bus stops at the end of the day. Pupils are encouraged to wear white shirts, neckties and trousers instead of blue jeans—and most respond.

Moreover, elementary precautions are enforced. No child may bring to school weapons of any sort, or cigarettes or money (save for some small change for a lunch treat — lunch itself and transportation cards are supplied free). Each day the youngsters are asked to give up any such articles they may have "absent-mindedly" brought with them. On occasion, cigarettes and knives are relinquished — and are not returned.

YET the school takes a positive approach to character rebuilding. Pupils are never searched, and there is never corporal punishment.

The small classes—some fifteen to twenty pupils to a teacher—can be far more flexible than is possible in the large regular schools. If a boy blows up, is abusive, belts another boy, or simply is not functioning, he is taken to the office "for talks" with the principal or his guidance counselor. Or he may be moved for the day into another class — from social studies, say, to shop work. Or his parents may be sent for.

The incidents that landed a boy in P. S. 612 are never mentioned, and the teachers — chosen for their special skills and "accepting personalities"— never find fault with a boy in the presence of others. They do, however, commend the children generously and publicly.

Because classes are small, teachers get to know every child as an individual. The principal, who visits classes regularly, knows each by name. Classroom doors stand open; movable furniture makes for informal, friendly groupings; walls are hung with colorful arrays of the boys' art and academic work.

Above all, there is a feeling of close personal relationships between teachers and pupils, of respect for one another —of empathy. The adults of this strange community apparently know, better than anything academic they can teach, that most of these youngsters have never known a decent relationship with an adult.

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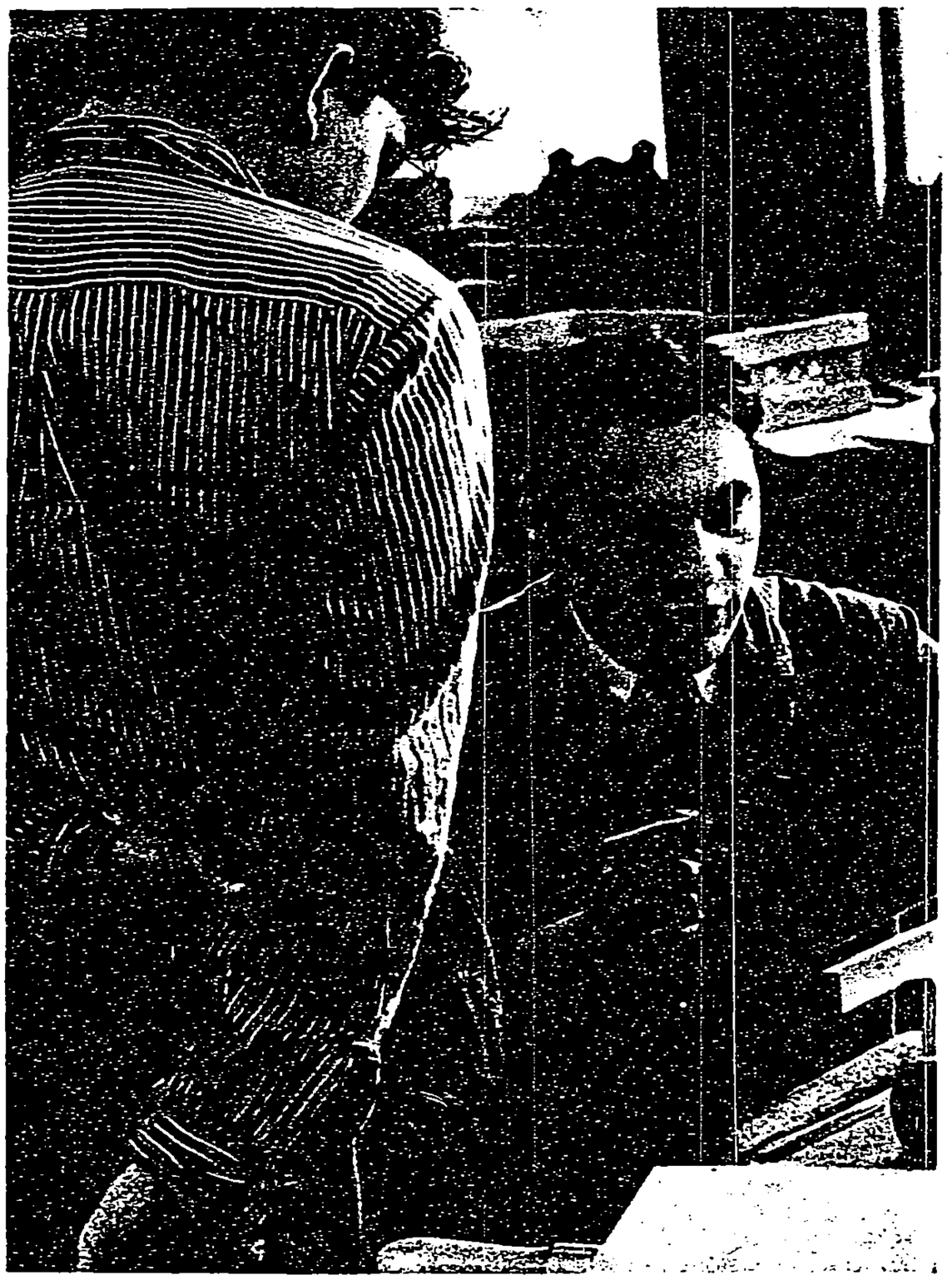
A YOUNGSTER enters a 600 school on referral from the regular school where he has failed. The boy and a parent both must come to school on the day of registration. This gives the principal an opportunity to size up the family relationship and describe the objectives and rules of the school.

Thus, the other day, Hazel Mittelman, principal of P. S. 612, an attractive wo- *(Continued on Page 57)*



PARTNERSHIP—In a P. S. 612 workshop, teacher Robert Ferlauto helps a boy with a problem.

GERTRUDE SAMUELS, staff writer for The Times magazine, has received the George Polk Memorial Award for education reporting.

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man with an open smile, greeted a nervously silent mother and her carefully spruced-up son with words to put them at ease: "I'm so glad that your son is being given the opportunity of coming here."

After the boy answered some questions, he visibly swelled when Miss Mittelman told his mother, "Oh, he has an excellent voice. He may want to join our dramatic group." Then she showed the mother some of the classes and workshops, meantime explaining the school's rules to her and the boy.

Like the regular schools, 612 is geared to an academic unit system

GUIDANCE—William Dorney, a teacher at P. S. 612, encourages students to project their own problems into a pictured situation.

(English - social studies, or mathematics-science, for example), but boys are assigned to grades on the basis of their "social" or emotional age rather than academic achievement. Emphasis is put on class mobility (providing variety with shop, gym, assemblies, movies, community trips) rather than on rigid scheduling of classwork, since academic progress is often subordinated to the social adjustment of a child.

IN the spacious woodworking shop on the fifth floor are nine workbenches with saws, planes, files, chisels, gouges, screw drivers, hammers — all potentially dangerous weapons. Ten youngsters of various ages work away industriously, making small tables and bric-a-brac or book shelves. The teacher, Robert Ferlauto, who graduated from the High School of Industrial Arts and took his master's degree in psychology at New York University, moves among them, helping this boy to saw some wood, listening to that boy's problem with varnish. His stocky figure and good-natured smile dominate the room; the boys clearly love him.

He never lets the boys have enough tools, he says, not from fear, but because he wants them to share what they have. When one boy asks to saw through a length of wood, Ferlauto gets another boy to hold the wood for him in the "shared work."

"I don't have to lock any of the tools up," he says calmly, "the children know that I trust them, and they trust me. They're treated as equals here. In this room, I can give them a sense of concrete achievement, and they take home things to be proud of."

* * *

THE school's approach is basically twofold: through group therapy, in regular classes and at play, and through individual therapy for exceptionally difficult cases.

In a group therapy, or "guidance," session of a graduating class, given by William Dorney, the school's guidance director, one glimpses the technique of helping youngsters project their own problems into an innocuous situation, thereby gaining insight into themselves, their parents and their community.

Thus Dorney, a strapping man with a forthright approach, held up a picture showing a boy with downcast head being berated by a man, while between them a woman sat huddled on a couch.

"Now I want you to use your imagination and your creative intelligence," Dorney started, "and tell me what seems to be happening in this picture."

For the next hour, he drew from the boys their personal reactions, involving the pictured family in imagined thefts, stabbings, quarrels and rejection of the boy. One youngster said, "The father looks like he's just hit the mother, and they've probably been hitting and cussing one another all the time."

FINALLY, Dorney asked the boys how the situations they had described could have been avoided. One answer reflected the ways in which teachers at 612 are trying to redirect the boys:

"Well, like when I said the boy got in a fight. He should have walked away. It takes more courage to walk away from a fight than to fight."

Individual therapy for extreme cases requires intensive preparation. Young Tommy's case history had been explored earlier in the day at a regular weekly "team session" of the principal, three teachers and psychiatric workers of the Bureau of Child Guidance. Tommy was an introverted child whose violent and morose behavior was traced to the hostility he witnessed between his parents, both of whom had been working.

Recently, the school had persuaded the mother to give up her job and spend more time with the boy. Now the team discussed how best to continue "reaching" both Tommy and his mother, on whom he depended.

After the session on could observe Tommy with his guidance teacher. For an hour, in an empty classroom, man and boy concentrated on a harmless game of "Round the Wide World," flipping small cards which directed them to "fly" their toy airplanes from country to country. Between moves, the teacher made seemingly innocent comments:

"Going to be in the play this year?"

"Why should I?"

"Well, I think you'd like to be up there on the stage."

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"Well—yes," the boy said. The teacher did not pursue the subject. They played quietly.

The visitor asked: "Do you like it here with your teacher?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Tommy's head came up sharply as he answered: "Because he's my friend. He likes me. He's good to me."

Tommy's answer provides a clue to why human salvage is possible in these schools.

THERE are nineteen teachers at P. S. 612 this year, including five substitutes (the 600 schools, like the regular schools, suffer from a lack of licensed personnel). The regular teachers must have had at least five years of experience in the city schools, as well as special training in mental hygiene, remedial reading and psychological testing. They get small financial recognition for their skills—a $480 bonus over the average $6,500 to $8,800 a year. Many 600 teachers with families must take second jobs after school hours.

Why do they do it? Let Dorney, who is taking his doctorate in remedial reading at New York University, tell:

"I feel that any success anyone has is predicated on what he can do for others. It's challenging work simply because other people have failed with it. It's a great satisfaction to see boys change when others have given them up.

"But there's no magic in a child going through the doors of a 600 school. He doesn't change overnight. It may take years to break down a pattern of behavior. Their world is very insecure, and while we can change a school situation, we can't change the communities they come from, or a father if he is a constant drunk, or a mother who has given up all hope.

"What we try to do is to give the child an insight into his problems—and then to show him that instead of hurting others he can help himself to achieve."

HOW do the children feel about their school? Ask 14-year-old Roger, who "used to fight the teacher, stay out of school and run with a gang." Roger expects to graduate from 612 and go on to vocational high school. "Everyone here is my friend," he says. "I mean, it's like living with them as though we were born together."

Or ask a graduate, like the 21-year-old sergeant whose uniform boasted service ribbons for Europe, the Middle East and the Far East when he came back to visit his favorite teacher in the print shop at 612.

"Here I learned about a lot of things," he said slowly, "how to set hand type and what a rule is, and how to set up a form. But most of all, I guess, there were people who cared about kids. This is the only school that taught me respect for work and courtesy."

* * *

THE length of stay for most pupils in a 600 school varies from one to three or four terms. Some go on to vocational or academic high schools (P. S. 612 graduates about thirty-five boys a term). For others, the school is a place of terminal education, and they apply for working papers. And some fail the experiment.

Within the past two years, five boys at P. S. 612 got into trouble after school hours—one was involved with thefts in a store; the others were constant truants or were taken to court by their parents for incorrigibility at home. They were committed to the New York State Training School for Boys for one-year terms, and are now back on probation at 612.

More recently, a teacher received a call from a pupil's grandmother: her grandson (for whom she cares since both his parents deserted him) had stolen money from her and had not been home for days. Would the teacher try to get her money back if he came to class? And there have been two or three incidents of boys belting one another, with one injured seriously enough to require stitches (their parents were called to school). The school's control—and, perhaps, approach—ends when a youngster leaves at the day's end.

No reliable studies have been made of youngsters who have left the schools during the past ten years. But estimates of the proportion rehabilitated range from 60 to 75 per cent.

REUNION—A serviceman revisits one of his former teachers in the print shop at P. S. 612.

In recent months, the worth of the 600 schools has come under the scrutiny of citizen and education groups.

One panel of experts, directed by Robert M. MacIver, professor emeritus of Columbia University, in two reports to the Mayor's office has criticized the schools on the grounds that (1) selection of the boys is too haphazard—screening for referrals should not be left up to principals of the regular schools but placed in the hands of Bureau of Child Guidance experts; (2) about 12 per cent of the boys are so erratic or withdrawn that they need a different kind of therapy and setting from that provided by the 600 schools; (3) since the majority of the boys are 14 years or older, the panel questioned the effectiveness of the 600-school approach in their lives.

The impression that the experts gained was that the schools were custodial rather than therapeutic. They said flatly that "any expansion of the * * * system would be unwarranted," and urged a new type of school, "possibly one offering a special pre-employment program."

ANOTHER panel of education and psychology experts, working under Presiding Justice John Warren Hill of the Domestic Relations Court, recently completed an eighteen-month study of the same 600 school system, and made recommendations diametrically opposed to the MacIver reports.

This panel recognized the need for improvements. It deplored the antiquated, remodeled buildings which have housed the schools, and stressed the need of remedial teachers, social workers and psychological and medical specialists on each school's staff. But it found that "the 600 day school fulfills a very necessary function," and urged that the program be expanded, with an additional school "in each borough as a first step," including a school for girls.

"The urgency of the problem," the report went on, "creates the necessity of meeting [it] squarely and without delays and equivocation."

As a Board of Education spokesman summed up both reports: "We believe that we should have both improvement *and* expansion. But we have to operate with what we've got. There's a difference between a theoretical ideal and the actual delivery of positions, money and buildings. The biggest problem is our local school board budget, and the lack of appropriations to realize our goal."

* * *

IN the end, the worth of the experiment must be measured by the needs—and hopes—of the children.

Recently, Class 7, Opportunity, at P. S. 612 was asked to write a composition on the subject "If I Had Three Wishes." Jerry, aged 15 years, wrote:

> My first wish is that my father would get well. He has heart trouble and is always sick. He is the one I like the most in my family.
>
> My second wish will be that I will be as big as I should. An that no body has to tease me about my age or my neck.
>
> My third wish is that I have good luck because everything I do has come out wrong and that I don't get in to so much trouble.

Across the top of Jerry's composition, his teacher had written: "Excellent."

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