MARVA COLLINS' WAY

Returning to Excellence in Education

Marva Collins and Civia Tamarkin

Foreword by Alex Haley

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Marva Collins

简介

Chapter 1.

Marva Collins got Freddle Harris to take off his St.Louis Cardinals jacket and hang it on the back of his chair.

It was shortly after the bell rang on the first day of school, and teachers at Delano Elementary School on Chicago's Near West Side were being unusually tolerant of students because no one was up to a challenge so soon. In fact, short of a knockdown fight, teachers were overlooking just about everything as they shuffled class cards and gave out seat assignments. No one wanted to march a student into the principal's office and admit things had already gotten out of control just ten minutes into the new 1974-1975 school year.

It didn't seem particularly significant whether or not Freddie was wearing a jacket in class, until Marva noticed how defiantly his fists were shoved into the pockets. Actually her only concern was that it was too hot for him to sit in class all day wearing that jacket. The room was already choking in a late-summer heat that promised to get worse by midmorning. When she moved closer to him and saw how tightly his lips were pressed together and how his shoulders were hunched up around his neck, she realized that Freddie Harris was working hard at being tough.

Freddie expected his stay at Delano, and in particular this class, to be brief. At nine years old he was a repeater in second grade, a troublemaker whose file down in the office bulged with psychologists' reports and harsh evaluations from previous teachers. Last May he was suspended for the remainder of the school term for fighting. The time before, he was kicked out for throwing food in the lunchroom. Before that, he had cussed at a teacher. He was readmitted now for the new fall semester with the principal's warning that the next infraction would get him thrown out of Delano for good.

That suited Freddie just fine. He didn't like school, and he didn't like the other children any more than they liked him. The children his age thought he was a baby for being stuck in second grade, and the

second-graders thought he was just big and dumb. Besides, he figured, once he was out of Delano, he would be finished with school. His old lady, the thought, wasn't going to pay for any private school, and she didn't like churches much so there was no chance of his being sent to a parochial school. All he had to do was get kicked out of this class and he could hang around all day and do what he wanted.

So when Marva asked him to take off his jacket, he just slumped further down in his seat, his fists stuffed into his pockets and his legs stretched out under the chair in front of him.

"Peach," Marva said softly, "You don't need to wear that jacket in class. Let's take it off and get out a pencil so we can do some work." She knew Freddie was trying to bait her, and her technique in this kind of situation was to be matter-of-fact. She was not sure yet how far Freddie would push it. Was he just introducing himself or trying for something more? She looked hard at him, wondering how many other teachers had fueled his fight.

Freddie turned his head away sharply, fixing his stare on the broken pane of glass in the third window.

"Sweetheart," said Marva, "it's so hot in here you're going to roast yourself."

He didn't move. She reached out and teasingly mussed his hair. "Besides," she said, "you're such a handsome, strong boy, I don't see why you want to cover up those big muscles of yours."

Marva thought she saw his mouth relax slightly, even hold back a smile, so she cupped his face in her hands and slowly drew him toward her. New children have such dull eyes, she thought, such sullen looks and empty expressions. At seven, eight, and nine years old they have already resigned themselves to failure.

Freddie refused to look up at her, though he allowed her to caress his face.

"Come on, peach, we have work to do," she said, standing straight and tall before him. Marva always stood tall, being easily six feet even without the high heels she liked to wear, never stooping under her height, not even when she was a long-armed and skinny-legged child with a size twelve shoe and the other children teased

her that she could knock the roof off the church. "You can't just sit in a seat and grow smart, " she said. Her eyes, which could turn dark and cold when she was angry, were soft on his face.

Then, because he hadn't jerked away from her touch, she let one hand fall to the collar of his jacket, and with the other she started to pull apart the front snap. His hand shot out of a pocket and locked tightly around her wrist.

"You are so very angry, " she murmured gently, "but I know you're not angry with me, because I haven't done anything to you. We all have a good me and a bad me inside us, and I know that you have a good you. Will you help me find it? I'm your friend and I'm going to help you all the time and I'm going to love you all the time. I love you already, and I'm going to love you even when you don't love yourself."

She pulled him close to her, his head resting against her hip. Her long fingers kneaded the tension from his shoulders and stroked the back of his neck. Marva worked painstakingly to know each child, training herself to catch the gesture, look, or remark that would tell her what a child needed.

Freddie pushed back into his chair, sat up tall, and with quick, short pulls began popping apart the snaps on his jacket, shipping his arms out of the sleeves. Marva bent over him, balanced his chin on the crook of her finger, and titled his head back so that he was looking straight at her. The subdued tone of her voice gave way suddenly to a new firmness. "I promise, you are going to do, you are going to produce. I am not going to let you fail."

Marva walked up to the front of the class. She had been teaching for fourteen and a half years ----- two at Monroe County Training School in Beatrice, Alabama and twelve and a half in the Chicago public school; and while she had grown to hate the teaching profession as a whole, she loved to teach. Septembers were always the same. She expected the anxiety would have worn off by now. It never did. She didn't sleep the night before school started, uneasy as a child going off for the first time.

With every new class there was so much to do. Somehow her room at Delano had become a way station for the castoffs the other

teachers didn't want. There were always children like Freddie Harris, the discipline problems. Last year she had her hands full with James Thomas. James had acted up all through kindergarten and first grade, and most teachers couldn't stand him.

When James misbehaved in her class during the first week of school, Marva called him over to her.

"James, do you know how to spell your name?" she asked.

The child nodded that he did.

"Well, fine." Marva said, "you go over to the file cabinet, open the drawer, and see if you can find your cumulative record card and read it."

James took out the card, glanced at it, and brought it to Marva with a puzzled look on his face. School had just started and Marva had already given him a grade of "Good" in conduct.

"Do you think you deserve that grade?" asked Marva.

"No," he answered.

"Do you want that grade?"

"Uh huh," he whispered.

"Then you go back to your seat and earn it."

James Thomas was not a problem the rest of the year.

Besides the troublemakers, Marva had children like Bernette Miller, the heavy-set, slow-moving girl in the first row, whose drawn-out speech prompted a previous teacher to dismiss her as a child with a learning disability. And there were children like pigtailed Wwanda Lewis, who had never learned how to spell her name or which side of the notebook paper to write on. She had been passed on to the next grade simply because she was so quiet.

Marva stopped beside Bernette Miller's desk. She said noting, but the children instantly shuffled around in their seats and faced forward. She had a commanding authority, and almost hypnotic presence.

Marva was a striking woman with high cheekbones and strong angular features, which she inherited along with a love of jewelry from a great-grandmother who was a Choctaw Indian. Slender though not willowy, Marva was immediately discernible in a crowd ——even without the visibility afforded by her height——for she had

acquired a poise and sophistication that gave her appearance a deliberate style.

Marva would rarely wear slacks, and she never wore loose-fitting shifts or casually assembled bloused and skirts. Sloppy dressing showed disrespect for oneself, for the children, and for the profession. From the first day of class Marva was teaching that self-respect is the most important thing a person can have. For herself and for the children Marva dressed impeccably, favoring cashmere sweaters, suits, and herring-bone tweeds. Her clothing was tailored and stylishly simple, but she usually added an ornamental touch: a carved belt cinched over a sweater, a gold medallion on a chain, an organdy boutonniere, or perhaps a lace handkerchief fanned in pleats across a pocket and held in place by a beaded lion's-head brooch. In Marva's opinion, it was important to have a unique imprint. She felt she was different from most people and delighted in her difference. It was an attitude often mistaken for arrogance.

"I am a teacher," she said to the class on this first day. "A teacher is someone who leads. There is no magic here. Mrs. Collins is no miracle worker. I do not walk on water, I do not part the sea. I just love children and work harder than a lot of people, and so will you.

"I know most of you can't spell your name. You don't know the alphabet, you don't know how to read, you don't know homonyms or how to syllabicate. I promise you that you will. None of you has ever failed. School may have failed you. Well, goodbye to failure, children. Welcome to success. You will read hard books in here and understand what you read. You will write every day so that writing becomes second nature to you. You will memorize a poem every week so that you can train your minds to remember things. It is useless for you to learn something in school if you are not going to remember it.

"But you must help me to help you. If you don't give anything, don't expect anything. Success is not coming to you, you must come to it."

The Children looked puzzled. They were accustomed to warnings, threats, and rules of order on the first day of class. If

nothing else, Marva vowed she would get through to these children because she was so determined. Or just plain stubborn. She was, in fact, more strong-willed than most, maybe even a bit too strong-willed for her own good. Over and over her mother used to warn her, "Marva, you'll never come to any good 'cause once your mind is set, there's no telling you what to do.'"

Marva Collins was not going to let any child make her a bad teacher.

"The first thing we are going to do in here, children," Marva told her class, "is an awful a lot of believing in ourselves."

Freddle Harris decided to give this teacher a try 'cause she sure was different from all the other teachers he had messed with and 'cause it seemed like he was getting nowhere by acing up, at least, not for now. He finished helping Marva hand out excerpts from Emerson's "Self Reliance." Freddie and all the other children began riffling through the mimeographed pages, shaking their heads in disbelief at all the print, mumbling an occasional "Wow" or "No way, man."

"what are you all getting so worried about?" Marva said. "I don't expect you to know how to read this. I will read it to you, but you must listen to what is says."

She liked to begin the school year with "Self Reliance." Marva believed that it was one of the most important things a student, especially a black student, could ever learn.

"Now let's look at the title. The first thing you must always look at is the title. What is the first thing you must look at, children? The t——."

"Title," a sprinkling of voices offered shyly.

"Very good." Marva walked to the blackboard, picked up a piece of chalk, and printed "Self Reliance" across the newly washed surface. "The title is 'Self Reliance,'" she repeated, marking the vowel sounds with colored chalk. "These are called diacritical marks, and they show us how to pronounce vowel sounds. The e in self has the short sound eh, so we put a breve over it. The first e and i in reliance have macrons, which tell us those vowel sound are long; the vowels say their own names."

Marva moved down the aisle by the windows. "Now we are going to read an essay called 'Self Reliance.' What is the title?" Marva asked the boy in the fifth seat of the third row, who was rubbing his fingers along the edge of the desk. The boy lowered his head, chin resting against his chest, and moved his fingers up and down in a nervous rhythm, waiting for his turn to pass.

"What is the title, sweetheart? Don't just sit there with your mouth shut. If you don't know, then say, 'Mrs. Collins, I don't know.' Don't ever be afraid of making a mistake. If you can't make a mistake, you can't make anything."

She sidled around the desks until she was beside him, her hand resting on his shoulder. Then she asked the same question of the child behind him.

"'Self Reliance,'" the girl answered.

"Very good," said Marva, unfastening the girl's barette and repositioning it to hold back a few stray strands of hair. "Let's keep the hair out of your eyes, pet, so you can see." Marva continued down the aisle, asking each child in that row to tell the title, getting each child accustomed to speaking in class, and with each answer she said, "Very good," "très bonne" "Laudo," or "Sehr gut," explaining that she was praising them in French, Latin, and German.

"Now, she said, "self-reliance means to believe in yourself. What does self-reliance mean? To be——."

"To believe in yourself," echoed a few faint voices.

"Everybody, in big outdoor voices, what does it mean?"

"To believe in yourself," the children said, more boldly.

"Very, very good, children," Marva told them in a steady businesslike voice, her eyes looking down on the paper as she calmed their rising enthusiasm and signaled them on to the next thought. Marva could lead with her eyes and her voice, winning control by a look or and inflection. Now her tone seemed to belie the praise she had just uttered, as if she were waning the children not to be too satisfied with one small success but to remember how much more there was to learn.

"The author of 'Self Reliance' was a man named Ralph Waldo Emerson," she continued. "You must always read the author's name.

If you like what an author writes, but you don't know the author's name, then you won't be able to find any more of his stories to read." She paused, gauging the children's interest. A few were wriggling in their seats. Wanda Lewis, in the back of the class, seemed lost in herself, staring out the window, tapping a pencil against her pudgy cheek.

"Darling." Marva motioned to Wanda, "If you just sit and look, you are going nowhere. Come up here beside me so we can keep track of one another." Marva helped the girl push her desk up the narrow aisle, maneuvering it the the front of the row as the other children shuffled their desks aside.

"All right, children, " she quieted the class. "Mr. Emerson was a writer, a poet, and a lecturer who lived in the 1800s. A lecturer is someone who talks before an audience or a class." Marva wrote the word on the board, underlining lecture."The base word is lecture, which is a talk or a speech. Someone who gives the talk or speech is a lecturer. Freeie, what is a lecturer?"

"Someone who gives a speech to a lot of people." Freddie murmured, smiling.

"That's very, very good, sweetheart." Marva told him. "See, you're so used to being wrong, you're afraid to be right. But speak more loudly next time. When you whisper, it means 'I don't like myself. I don't believe what I say.' What you say is important. Each of you is the most important child in the world.

"Now, children, Mr. Emerson was born in Boston in 1803. Where is Boston?" She waited for a response. "Come on, children, think, think, shake your brains! James, come up here to the map and show us where Boston is."

"A stocky boy with short-cropped hair walked hesitantly to the wall map. Marva straightened his collar, telling him what a handsome shirt it was. She put her arm around him. With her free hand she guided his index finger to the correct spot on the map."

"That's wonderful, James, Boston is the capital of Massachusetts. Thank you, James, you are just so bright," she told him as he sat down grinning. "Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in

Boston, Massachustees, and his father was a minister. Where was Mr. Emerson born, children?"

"Boston," they answered.

"Very good. Boston. Now when Ralph was not quite eight years old, as old as some of you, his father died. The family was so poor that Ralph and his brother had to share the same winter coat. Yet Ralph and all of his three brothers studied hard and they all went to Harvard College when they grew up."

She move around the room as she spoke, patting a head of caressing an arm. "When he graduated, Ralph Waldo Emerson became a teacher for a while to help pay for his brother William's college education, and then he became a minister. Mr. Emerson was always questioning life, and he didn't always agree with the church or the other ministers. How many of you question life? How many of you wonder why things happen the way they do?"

Two students immediately raised their hands. The rest watched curiously, surprised by their classmates' willingness to respond.

"Do you mean to tell me that only a few of you question the way things are?" Marva asked, exaggerating her amazement "Well, I guess most of you think life is wonderful. Everyone always has enough to eat, a good place to live. There is no suffering, no poverty…"

Her words were muffled by the children's groans and giggles.

"Of course, you don't," she continued slowly. "Every time you say 'That's not fair' or you wonder why something is the way it is, you are questioning life, just as Mr. Emerson did. He believe that every person has a free will and can choose to make his life what he wants it to be. I believe that. I believe that you can make your life anything you want it to be."

Marva read aloud passages from the essay. She felt the children's restlessness as she read. Their eyes were roving around the room. A few had their arms slung over the backs of their chairs, their feet swinging sideways into the aisles. But Marva continued. When she finished, she sat on the edge of a child's desk and looked at the class.

She said in a lower voice, "So you think this work is too difficult for you? Well, do not expect to do baby work in here. School can teach you how to lead a good life. We all come here to make life better. And the knowledge you put in your heads is going to save whom? You, not me. Mr. Emerson is telling us to trust our own thoughts, to think for ourselves and not worry about what other people tell us to think. Tanya, what does Emerson tell us to do?"

"Trust ourselves," replied Tanya.

"Very, very good, Tanya," Marva said, "James, what does Emerson tell us to do?"

"Trust ourselves."

"Very good, James. You're so clever, but I don't want to see you put your head on the desk. If you are sleepy, you should be home. This is a classroom, not a hospital or a hotel. I don't ever want to see any of you napping in your seats or just sitting with your hands folded, doing noting. This is not a prayer meeting. If I see your hands folded, I'm going to put a Bible in them."

The children giggled and Marva smiled. A bond was beginning to grow between them. What she said and did this first day would determine the rest of their year together. She left nothing to chance.

It was Marva Collins' attitude that made children learn. What she did was brainwash them into succeeding. She was forever saying "You can do it," convincing her students there wasn't anything they could not do. There were no excuses for a child's not learning. There was no point in fixing the blame on television, or parents, or a child's environment. The decisive factor was the teacher up in front of the class. If a child sensed a teacher didn't care, then all the textbooks and prepackaged lesson plans and audio-visual equipment and fancy, new, carpeted, air-conditioned building facilities weren't going to get that child to learn.

"Children," she began, "today will decide whether you succeed or fail tomorrow. I promise you, I won't let you fail. I care about you. I love you. You can pay people to teach, but not to care.

"Some teachers sit behind a big desk, like a king in a castle, and the children are like the poor peasants. The desk isolates them from the children. But I don't sit behind a big desk in front of the class. I

walk up and down the rows of desks every day and I hug each of you every day.

"Have you ever been afraid to go up to the teacher's desk? Did you think someone would laugh at you if you made a mistake?"

Marva didn't wait for an answer. She knew each child was following her closely. "Tell me when I'm wrong. You must never be afraid to tell a teacher if she is wrong. I'm not God. My mouth is no prayerbook. We shall work together. How many of you have been afraid to ask other teachers questions?"

Hands immediately went up.

"Why were you afraid to ask, Michele?"

"I was afraid the teacher would holler."

"Why were you afraid, Jerome?"

"I was afraid I would get hit with a ruler," he said flatly, expecting the snickers that came from his classmates.

"When you were afraid of a teacher, Bernette, what were you afraid of?"

"I was afraid she would make everyone laugh at me. My other teacher used to act like she was perfect or something. She used to make me feel dumb."

"Sometimes I don't like other grown-ups very much because they think they know everything. I don't know everything." Marva said. "I can learn all the time."

There was excitement building and Marva worked the momentum, like an entertainer who felt the pulse of an audience. "Oh, I love to see your eyes dance, " she said. "New children have such dull eyes, but yours are already coming alive." She continued more seriously. "How many times did you feel old enough or smart enough to do something and then some grown-up told you 'You don't know how to do that'? I never like to hear grown-ups say that to a child. I don't know what you know. I can't wriggle down inside your skin or get into your brains. I am just another human being who has lived longer than you. I'm not smarter. I'm not greater. I bleed when I'm hurt, and I'm tired when I don't get enough sleep. But I am always here, to what? To help you. Freddie, tell me what you learned from Mr. Emerson's essay."

Freeddie looked attentively at Marva but didn't answer.

"You have a right to your opinion. You say what you think." Marva told him. "Don't care what anyone else thinks. What's inside of you is important."

"I learned about self-reliance." Freddie whispered.

"Speak in a big voice, peach. What does self-reliance mean? Believing in——."

"Believing in yourself?"

"Of course it does, but say it with confidence so we all know you believe in what you're saying. Let us all know how bright you are." Marva said, nodding. "Chris, what did you learn from Mr. Emerson?"

"To trust my own thoughts."

"Very good, Chris. See how much you already know? Marcu, what did you learn?"

"If you don't think for yourself, other people will tell you what to think."

Marva's eyes glistened. She laughed, sweeping her arm dramatically to her brow as she held herself up against the window sill, feigning a swoon. "Oh, I just can't stand it. You're all so bright. You're all so sagacious. Sagacious means smart and wise. What does sagacious mean, children?"

"Smart and wise," they chanted.

"And who is sagacious?"

"We are," they shouted.

"You certainly are." Marva put a throaty emphasis on certainly as she walked the rows of desks ruffling hair, pinching a cheek, squeezing a shoulder.

It was a beginning. The skills would come later with the daily drills of sounds and words over and over until Marva was tired of the litany. First she had to convince the children she cared about them, convince them to trust her, and make them believe they could do anything they wanted to do.

Chapter 2.

On the second day of school, Marva taught the English folk tale "The Little Red Hen and the Grain of Wheat." She had long believed that fairy tales and fables were effective in promoting emotional, intellectual, and social development. Most of the students were intrigued by the modulation of her voice and the changes in her face as she read aloud, shifting from one character to the next.

After the fourth round of quacking and squeaking and grunting "Not I," Marva noticed that Bernette Miller had taken off her locket and was looping the chain around her fingers, twisting it into a Cat's Cradle.

"You knew how to play with a chain when you came to school," Marva said, "Playing with a chain is a good way to get a job, isn't it? Put it away and listen to the story. I am not reading it just to entertain you. There is a lesson here. And we all better start paying attention to lessons like these, or this world we live in is surely headed for trouble."

Marva added, "I love you children all the time, even though I may correct you or disagree with you some of the time."

Marva finished the story. She closed the book, clasped it to her with one hand, and raised the other, index finger extended like a maestro's baton. Without losing the intensity delivered in the last line of the story, the discussion began.

"Do you think the little red hen was right in not sharing her bread with the duck, the mouse, and the pig?"

Heads nodded in agreement.

"Why was she right?" Three were various demonstrations of squirming and fidgeting but no volunteers: after a while they would enjoy the heaping doses of teacher-student dialogue, but for now it was still a new and intimidating proposition. "Come on, come on, " Marva said, "I am not going to leave you alone to become workbook idiots. You are not going to spend your time in here pasting and

coloring and circling pictures. We're going to do some thinking in here. Now, why do you feel the hen was right?"

"She done it all. They was lazy." Came a voice from the back.

"She did all what? She did all the work, didn't she? She had to sow and cut and thresh the wheat, and she had to carry it to the mill to be ground into flour, and she had to bake the loaf of bread. The other animals were lazy. They didn't want to help do any of the work. They only wanted to help eat the bread. What is the moral of this story? What lesson does it teach us? If we don't work, we don't eat. If we don't work, we don't——"

"Eat." Came the unanimous reply. There was safety in numbers. Getting a child to take a chance and venture his or her own answer was another matter.

"Now, what would you say if I told you I think that hen was being selfish. She should have shared what she had with the other barnyard animals. What do you think about that?"

"No." they all shook their head.

"Why not? Don't grown-ups always tell children that they should share their toys or their cookies or their candy? Freddie?"

"It ain't the same, " he said.

"Isn't, sweetheart, it isn't the same. Children, listen to me for a moment. To succeed in this world, you must speak correctly. I don't want to hear any jive talk in here or any of this stuff about black English. You must not just think of yourselves as black children or ghetto children. You must become citizens of the world, like Socrates."

"Now, Freeddie, why do you think there is a difference between the little red hen who did not share her bread and little children, who are always being told they should share their toys with others?"

"The hen had to work hard for the bread."

"That's wonderful, Freddie. You are absolutely right. The hen earned what she had. There is no comparison between the two situations. They are not analogous. You all know the word same. Let's try to learn some big words. Analogous means same or similar.

"Suppose I ask a child to help me do some chores, and when the chores are done I give the child some candy. Does the child have

to share it with you because you say 'Give me some?'"

They shook their heads again.

"of course not. You have a right to be rewarded for your work, for your efforts, and you also have a right to keep what you have earned. You don't have to give it away every time someone comes up to you with a hand out asking for something. A person who has his hand out today is going to have that hand out tomorrow. You are not going to solve his problem by giving him something free. He has to learn to solve his own problem. If you give another student in this class the answer to the homework, are you helping that student? No, you are cheating him out of learning how to find the answer himself.

"So the lesson of the story is one of the most important lessons you can learn. The person who does the work will be the one who has plenty of food, good clothes, and a fine house. The lazy person is always going to be standing there with his hand out. You have the choice, the right to choose which kind of person you want to be."

There it was. Marva had played her full hand. A teacher had to sell children on the idea of learning.

Oddly, Marva had not planned on becoming a teacher. She had not, in fact, given much thought to what she would do. As a child she had had the usual fleeting sort of girlish aspirations. One day she wanted to be a nurse, the next a secretary. With a child's fickleness she moved on to each new thing, her wishes shaped by a character in a book or a picture in a magazine. In that she was no different from other children. But what distinguished Marva's life from those around her——from the black children living in the wooden shanties with whom she went to school——was that she could entertain the vagaries of ambition beyond the age when others had to reconcile or surrender theirs. Necessity made no such demands on her. She grew up wealthy, pampered, and sheltered by small-town innocence and a doting protective father. She lived the freedom other people only dreamt.

I was born on August 31, 1936, in Monroeville, Alabama, about fifty miles north of mobile, I grew up during the Depression, but while I can remember hearing the grown-ups talk about how times

were hard and there was no money, none of that really affected my own life.

My father, Henry Knight, was one of the richest black men in Monroeville. We lived in a six-bedroom white clapboard house that had polished wood floors, store-bought furniture, and oriental rugs. Ours was one of the finest houses in the northern end of town, which was where all the blacks lived. People used to joke that our house was so fine you had to take your shoes off before going inside. My mother, Bessie, dressed me like a doll in ruffled, ribboned dresses and crisply pleated store-bought school dresses tied in back with an ironed sash. Because I looks so different from the other children, I had to put up with a lot of teasing. My schoolmates were mostly dressed in clothes their mothers made from the empty twenty-five-pound flour sacks they got from my father's grocery store.

There was determination in my family. We were always a family of doers and achievers. My mother's father, William Nettles, farmed all night and peddled meat door to door during the day, and he was the first black man in town to have a car, a crank-up Model T Ford. Everyone else rode around in muledrawn wagons. My other grandfather, Henry Knight. Sr., owned a store and several houses and lived off his rental properties. He was a patient, thrifty man who always looked successful in a suit and tie, a gold watch chain, and well-shined shoes. I remember wondering why he always wore Sunday clothes.

I believed my father was the greatest man who ever lived. I would never meet anyone I admired more. He was the moving force in my life and we had a very special relationship. Of course, I loved my mother, but we weren't as close. My mother was very prim and proper, not as free with the hugs and kisses as my dad. She showed her love and concern for me by making sure I ate the right foods and wore the right clothes. I knew she loved me, but I missed hearing her tell me that she did. As an adult I have come to understand how important it is to be openly affectionate with a child, to be sensitive to a child's feelings. I couldn't talk things over with my mother, which was especially frustrating since I was the only

child in the family until I was fourteen and always needed someone to talk to. My father was always there. I could say anything to him, even if it was silly, and he would patiently listen. I never felt I had to prove anything to him. I always knew where I stood. But I could never quite please my mother. I was not as lady like or as well-behaved or as pretty as she wanted me to be. Parents don't realize how they can nag and pick away at a child until there is nothing left to pick. My dad was always supportive, constantly telling me how smart and pretty and special I was, even when I wasn't, so felt good about myself. However, I did become an overachiever, and I attribute that to my mother saying I would never come to any good.

My father had only a fourth-grade education, but he was the smartest person I ever knew. He was a risk-taker with an instinct for business. Taking over his father's grocery store, he played the assets into a thousand-acre cattle ranch and the town funeral parlor. He was a clever businessman, and even when he didn't have enough collateral, he somehow convinced people to go along with him on faith. When products were scarce on every grocery shelf during the Second World War, my father made a deal with an A&P down in Florida that could buy goods in larger quantities. He was the only merchant in Alabama ——black or white——who had steaks, nylon stockings, chocolates, and chewing gum for his customers.

The black community in Monroeville existed apart from the white community. Blacks who were engaged in business were important and had a lot of influence. Since my father was the only black undertaker and the only black proprietor of a grocery store, he was a leader in the black community. The white businessmen respected him, and among blacks he was well respected though he was not particularly liked. Many people were envious of him. Sometimes people said they didn't want to shop in his store and make him any richer, yet those same people came to him when they didn't have money because they knew he would give them credit.

If someone got into trouble in town and was headed for jail, my father stood the bail bond. Not only blackes but many whites—— some who owned the big stores downtown——would sneak into our house after dark to borrow money from my father. They didn't want

anyone to know they were having anything to do with blacks, much less borrowing money. My father never chased me out of the room or said "This is none of your business," so I learned very early in life that white society was not the bright paradise other black children thought it was.

My father treated me the same as he would have treated a son, mainly, I guess, because I was always following him around. I didn't have a lot of playmates my own age because the other children had to work in the cotton fields after school and during vocations. I used to beg my parents to let me go to the cotton fields with the other children. Once my father let me go and I caught a bad cold. My father said he had to spend more money for the doctor than I earned in two days picking cotton, so he didn't let me go back. It was just as well because the foreman had told me not to come back to his field. He didn't like my bright ideas for making my cotton weigh more, such as putting stones in the bottom of the sack or pulling the whole cotton boll, branch and all. The other children took their job seriously because they had to.

Another reason I spent so much time with my father was that my mother constantly shooed me out of the house. She was a fastidious housekeeper, impatient with an awkward child who always seemed to spill and break things. "You can't keep a house in order," she would tell me. "I hope I live to see you grow up 'cause the buzzards are gonna fly over your house." My mother didn't try teaching me to cook and sew. She later said she realized it was a mistake because when I first married Clarence Collins, he had to take charge of the cooking and sewing. The funny thing is that I picked up my mother's house-keeping habits and I now find I have many of the same quirks.

From the time I was eight I woke at dawn and went with my father to open the grocery store. The people in town would buy bread before they set off to work in the fields. Late afternoons I helped him add the day's receipts. I counted the pennies and quarters and put them into rolls, and I helped haul out the empty cartons and sacks, which my father burned in a huge bonfire. Sometimes we'd roast potatoes or hotdogs over the flames. When

my father slaughtered a cow in the large yard behind the house, I was out there with him, sprawled across the overhanging limb of the chinaberry tree.

Sometimes I sat there daydreaming about travel to exotic places. Or I imagined myself grown up and married with children of my own. For all my tomboyish ways——climbing the plum and chinaberry trees, throwing the hard green berries, playing in the dark, cool caves——I was always sure I wanted to get married and have children with enchanting names like Chiquita Denise and Frenette Rene. Strangely, I ended up giving my children ordinary names——Eric, Patrick, and Cynthia.

At night when all the chores were finished, my father and I sat together and I would read alound from The Montgomery Mittiser and The Mobile Press or Aesop's Fables or poetry books, until my mother waved me on to bed. And I would fall asleep thinking about the things I had read, pretending I was one of the characters in the stories.

On Saturdays I rode through town with my father, sitting next to him on the front seat of the new black Cadillac he bought each year for his funeral parlor. As we drove past the black men loitering in the town square, my father shook his head and said how undignified they looked. And when we saw black women carrying baskets of whitefolk's laundry on their heads, my father always said, "if I have to work all day and night, I'll never see my family doing other people's washing."

During the summer, from the time I was seven, I went on cattle-buying trips with my father. One day a week we would drive through the Alabama Black Belt, from county to county, through the rolling prairies filled with goldenrod and canebrake. Sometimes we went to the livestock markets in Montgomery.

In the 1940s Alabama cattle auctions were segregated, like everything else. Although everyone bid on the same cattle, blacks and whites sat in separate buying sections. I grew up with that racism. You were always reminded you were were black. You were always expected to know your place. Blacks had to use separate water fountains and rest rooms. We weren't served in restaurants.

We had to go around to a back window if we wanted food. My father always said he would whip me within an inch of my life if he caught me getting food at a back counter. He also wouldn't let my mother or me go into a department store because white sales clerks gave black customers a hard time about trying on clothes. Black women had to put a piece of plastic on their heads before trying on hats. My father would no allow my mother or me to be humiliated. He did all the shopping and brought clothes home for us.

He was a proud man and a nonconformist. He did things that were unheard of in those days. He marched into the dentist's office through the front door, though blacks were supposed to come in through the back. And he got away with it. No one said anything. I guess his money made the difference.

At an auction he outbid the buyers from Swift and Cudahy, the big meat packing houses. Afterwards, at the cashier's window, the buyers were waiting for my father. They shouted at him, backed him into a corner, and warned him not to come back to the cattle sales again.

I watched, frightened. Though I lived with the day-to-day realities of segregation and was used to hearing the word nigger, I had never directly experienced the violence and horrors of racism. I only heard about it. The grown-ups still talked about the Scottsboro boys. Occasionally I would hear about lynchings, or about people who were beaten up by the sheriff and dragged off to jail in the middle of the night. None of that had ever touched my own family. The first time I saw race hatred up close was when those buyers surrounded my father.

He did not apologize. He was silent, his eyes firmly set, not a muscle in him moving. He stood there tall and distinguished-looking in his starched shirt and creased trousers with the Stacy Adams shoes he always wore. He looked the men straight in their eyes and said he'd be coming back to the next auction. If they were going to kill him, he'd take one of them with him when he died.

I thought the men would hurt him then. They hesitated, asking each other what to do about "that nigger." Just then two other white men came by and broke things up. The buyers shrugged and walked

away. On the way home my father told me, "I made an honest bid. If you believe in what you do, then you don't ever have to fear anyone."

Every sale after that, my mother pleaded with my father not to go, but he said, "I'm not going to stay away. I can't die but once." That was the kind of determination I learned from him. He was a man of srong values and uncompromising beliefs. I always believed strength was passed on from one generation to the next. I guess I felt secure and confident, maybe because I was Henry Knight's daughter, but also because growing up in a small town like Monroeville, Albbama, I was sheltered and protected from a lot of things. We didn't have the kind of crime they had in the big cities. We didn't worry about rapes or muggings or drugs. If those things were happening somewhere else, we only learned about if from the newspapers, and by the time we got the news from Mobile it was already history.

I lived in a town where everyone seemed to know and trust everyone else. Just about everybody was cousin this or cousin that. Like that other children in Monroeville I was free to roam from yard to yard collecting pecans and figs in the autumn, free to roam through the pine forests searching for cones, free to play in the low red-clay hills, sliding down mud banks, wading in creeks, building dams along the shore. It was a happy, carefree childhood.

When I was twelve, my parents separated. My father remained in Monroeville, while my mother and I moved forty yards south to Atmore. I don't really know what went wrong between my parents. Maybe I have just blocked the whole thing out of my mind. But somehow I was able to cope with their separation. My father had already taught me to be a survivor. He taught me that whatever happens in life, a person has to go forward. Perhaps I forced myself to adjust so I could show my father I was just like him.

I remained close with my father, and he continued to be the strongest force in my life. I visited him summers, weekends, and sometimes during the week. He was never farther than a phone call or a short drive away. In the meantime Atmore became home. I

spent my adolescence there with my mother, her new husband, and a new baby sister, Cynthia.

But the years in Monroeville were the great, great years of my childhood. Those were the years that made me what I am.

Chapter 3

Marva moved up and down the rows of desks. "I could just cry that you have no sounds," she said, "for sounds make up words, and words are thoughts. Ideas. And the thoughts and ideas in your heads make up what you are.

"Well, you will have the sounds. You will never have to guess at them. Sounds are like keys, opening the door to words. If you don't have the right key, you can't open the door to your house, can you? If you don't have the right sounds, you can't pronounce a word."

Marva twirled around to the board and worte The catamaran sailed around the ait. "what does that mean?" she asked. The class looked lost. "All right, let's see what we have. Let's syllabicate catamaran. The first vowel sound is a short a, as in cat. The next two vowel sounds are uh, which we mark with this sign, called a German schwa. It looks like an upside-down e, but I don't ever want to hear any of you calling it an upside-down e sound. It is called a German schwa. All right, the last a also has a short vowel sound, ran. Catamaran. A catamaran is a kind of sailboat.

"The catamaran sailed around the ait. The vowels a and I make one sound, the sound of a long a. The rule is: when two vowels go walking. The first one does the talking; it says its name. Ait. An ait is a small island in the middle of a river or lake.

"So now you know that the sailboat sailed around the small island. See how you were lost in words? That will never happen to you again. You will learn all the rules so that words will no longer be a mystery. You will be able to talk to anyone, no matter how smart, no matter how rich, no matter how pretty. You are all clever bright children, and there's nothing you can't do."

I learned to read before I was old enough to go to school. My grandmother used to read aloud to me from her Bible, sounding out words by syllables. She had learned to read and spell by syllables when she was in school. By listening to her and imitating what she said, I learned the letter sounds and how to blend them together to

read printed words. Once I discovered how to sound out words, I tried reading everything I could get my hands on: labels on cans and boxes, the farmer's almanac, newspapers, books of fairy tales and fables, and especially Grandma Annie Knight's huge black-leather Bible. My favorite was the story about Joseph and his brothers. I read it over and over until my grand mother——"Mama-Dear," as I called her——would shake her head and say, "Baby, you read so much I'm afraid you're gonna lose your mind." The old people in the South had a superstition that a child who was too studious——prissy was their words for it——was headed for trouble.

My introduction to literature began with the Bible stories I heard from my grandmother. Mama-Dear read her Bible every day. Down South everyone was religious. I grew up during the time of the big revival meetings when going to church was serious business. If you didn't go, you were an outcast. But Mama-Dear was the most pious, prayerful person I ever saw. Every morning and every night she got down on her knees beside her high, four-poster bed and said her prayers. When Mama-Dear wasn't praying or reading her Bible, she was walking around the house singing "Precious Lord Take My Hand" and "What A Friend We Have In Jesus." She was forever reciting proverbs. Time and tide wait for no man. Good that comes too late is good for nothing. "Baby," she would say to me, "a good name will go farther than you will." I got so tired of hearing those proverbs when I was a child. Now I use them all the time. Sometimes they are the best way of saying what needs to be said. I teach them to my students. I have a collection of proverbs for class discussions and writing assignments.

I spent a lot of time with Mama-Dear and Grandpa Daddy Henry. Some nights the three of us sat in front of the fireplace as the flames cast shadows that danced on the walls. The scent of burning pinecones floated lightly through the living room white Mama-Dear recited poems like "Hiawatha" or "Paul Revere's Ride." She had memorized them as a schoolgirl and was still proud of knowing them by heart.

I was smitten with poetry and literature. But there were no libraries for black children in Alabama. The only books I could get

were the ones I bought, borrowed, or received as gifts. When my parents took me visiting to someone's house, I would disappear, rummaging through cabinets and shelves in search of books. A book was a treasure, and I lost myself in everyone I found——a basic reader brought home from school, a True Confessions magazine, or even a dictionary. I read Nancy Drew mysteries, gothic romances, Richard Wright's Black Boy and Rative Son, and Booker T. Washington, who I thought was the second greatest man next to my father. And I loved Erskine Caldwell's God's Little Acre, though my mother didn't approve of my reading such books. I bought half a dozen copies of God's Little Acre with the money I earned helping in the store. I hid them in different places as insurance. Every time my mother found the book and threw it away. I would take out another copy and continue reading.

It was Aunt Ruby Jones, my mother's sister, who introduced me to William Shakespeare. Aunt Ruby had gone back to high school after marrying and having two children. When I was at her house playing with my cousins, I would see her studying and reading from her schoolbooks. One night I overheard Aunt Ruby talking to Uncle Robert about someone named Lady Macbeth, Then she opened an old gray book and begin reading:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day…

I was only nine at the time, but I was enthralled by the lines. For days after that I walked around with "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" spinning in my head. The next visit to Aunt Ruby's, I asked if I could borrow that gray book. I read through Macbeth, and while I was not able to grasp its full meaning. I was fascinated by the action and the characters of the play. I thought it was such fun to say "Double, double, toil and trouble." My interest in Shakespeare wasn't encouraged until I reached high school. We never read Shakespeare in the lower grades. Most students still don't.

Along with the other black children in Monroeville I spent the primary grades at Bethlehem Academy, a clapboard building with

unpainted walls and a woodburning stove in each room. There were two grades to a classroom. Books were in short supply, and most of our teachers had only a tenth grade education themselves.

Out of all the teachers at Bethlehem two left a strong impression. I got off to a bad start with my first teacher, a heavyset woman who often wore a blue dress patterned with red, green, and yellow alphabet letters. In the first week of school when we were learning Arabic numerals, I kept making the numeral 2 backwards. Each time I drew it wrong the teacher rapped my fingers with a ruler. I never understood why she kept hitting me. If I had known how to do it right, I would have. She acted as though I had made the mistake deliberately.

I never forgot that experience. It has influenced the teaching methods I use with my students. To me an error means a child needs help, not a reprimand or ridicule for doing it wrong. No child should ever be told "That's stupid" or "You can't do it" or "You don't know what you're doing." Adults should take a positive approach with children. The most important thing we can do as parents and teachers is build a child's self-confidence. Any child can learn if he or she has not already been taught too thoroughly that learning is impossible. Children need reassurance and encouragement. They have to be told that it is all right to make mistakes because mistakes are part of learning. I tell my students:"If you knew everything there is to know, then you wouldn't have to be in school."

Praise is essential in developing the right attitude toward learning and toward school. We all know this in theory. In practice we often forget the importance of praise in dealing with children. We forget how sensitive children can be and how fragile their egos are. It is painful for a child to be told "This is wrong." Rather than punishing, teachers and parents should encourage continued effort:" This is good. It's a wonderful try, but it is not quite right. Let's try correcting this together."

I praise every child's effort. I put every child's paper up on the wall or the bulletin board, not just the perfect ones. And I never put a failing grade or red marks all over a paper. That is a sure way to turn a child off of learning. Put yourself in the place of a child who is

handed back a paper with a low grade while the other children have received high marks. Imagine how that child feels when everyone asks each other, as children always do, "what did you get on your paper?" that child wants to crumple the paper and throw it away. That child wants to get away from school. I write "very good" or "wonderful work" or make a smiling face on every paper. Then I handle errors by working individually with each child. We correct errors on a separate piece of paper. On an individual work sheet, or at the blackboard. I learned the value of blackboard practice from my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. McGants.

Mrs. McGants was a patient, good teacher. She had her students work at the blackboard so she could correct mistakes as quickly as they were made. Children need immediate feedback, especially in math and language where they need to master one skill before they can go on to the next. I do not wait days before returning papers. Errors will mean nothing to a child several days later when the class has moved on to something new. Delay in correcting errors only makes the child fall behind.

I find that children often understand a concept better when you take them to the black board rather than trying to correct them at their seat. This practice helps the rest of the class at the same time, especially the shy child who will never come out and say that he or she does not understand. I draw a large part of my curriculum from these errors, not from the teaching guides. One child's errors become a lessons for the whole class. If one child is having trouble with something, it is likely that others are also, and all can benefit from a review.

My teaching methods evolved, in part, from my own experience as a student. My first grade teacher was a model for what not to do. My fourth grade teacher showed me what to do. Miss Rolle, my tenth grade teacher at Escambia County Training School, was my favorite. She was probably not as beautiful as I then thought, but the way she walked and moved made her seem very sophisticated. I wanted to be just like her. Though MissRolle was from Alabama, she did not have a thick southern accent. I was so impressed by now articulate she was and how she enunciate her words that I practiced

imitating her. I studied vocabulary from the dictionary all the time. Townsfolk used to tell my father, "The way that girls words together is like something out of the pages of a book." The white salesmen who came from Mobile to take purchasing orders for cans of beans and boxes of chickens would come into my dad's grocery store and ask, "Henry, where's your girl? I sure do like listening to the way she talks."

I suppose it is because of Miss Rolle that I stress proper speech and pronunciation with my own students. I try to get them in the habit of using correct grammar when they speak, and I have them read aloud every day so I can check pronunciation as well as comprehension. Having children read silently in class only allows their mistakes to go unnoticed. I have heard children read capa-city for capacity, denny instead of deny, or doze instead of does, treating the final s as though it pluralized the word doe. Children frequently reverse letters when they read. For example, they confuse sacred and scared, diary and dairy, angel and angle. If children read silently, they continue to make those mistakes.

Another reason for reading aloud is to build vocabulary. A child reading silently skips over big words he doesn't know. When I am there listening to a child read, I can interrupt to ask the meaning. The whole class benefits as we can look up the definition, the base word within the larger word, and the part of speech. I also have my students read aloud for tone, inflection and punctuation. Reading aloud helps a child realize the difference between a comma, a period, a question mark, and an exclamation point. Children who are just learning to read tend to read individual words, not groups of words or phrases. That limits comprehension. I encourage my students to become idea readers, not word readers. By reading aloud children learn to understand words within the context of a sentence, and they see how words connect with each other to express an idea. This practice promotes not only good reading but good writing.

My students read everything orally——literature, science, social studies, and history. I even have them read their compositions aloud every day. It makes children more conscious of sentence structure,

allows them to proofread for punctuation errors and word omissions, and helps them develop a certain presence and authority in front of an audience. Miss Rolle used to make us stand and read out papers to the class.

Except for Miss Rolle's and Mrs McGants' classes, my schooling was typical of the separate and unequal education black children received in Alabama during the forties and fifties. Yet I found my own way around the inequities.

At Escambla County Training School——all high schools for black students were called training schools——girls did not graduate without taking home economics. I suppose it was the whitefolks way of saying all black women would never be anything more than homemakers or domestics. I refused to take it and signed up for a typing course instead. Shortly before graduation the principal called me into his office to say that unless I took the required course, I would not receive my diploma. I told him that I already knew enough about housekeeping. I didn't know what I was going to do when I went out into the world, but typing was going to be of more help than home economics, I never knew what made the principal change his mind. I was the only female student who ever graduated from Escambia County Training School without taking home economics.

From the day I became aware of what college was, I made up my mind I was going. My parents never stressed college degrees, not having had a high school education themselves, but they stressed learning.

I chose Clark College in Atlanta, an exclusive, all-black library arts school for girls. My father had no objection. He was proud of my being the first one in the family to go to college, and he believed it was his duty as a parent to make sure his child had the best. From the way the neighbors carried on, my father might have committed a cardinal sin. "What are you sending that girl to college for?" they asked him. "You'll never get your money back, 'cause that girl's never gonna do a thing for you."

Everything at Clark was very southern and very proper with a certain finishing-school mentality. How a student dressed was just as

important as what she learned. My house-mother made certain I wore hats and white gloves, and she once sent me back to my room to change because I had made the "mistake" of wearing suede shoes with a leather jacket. To this day I am very conscious of clothes and appearance.

I don't believe I learned very much at college. It was my own fault. I went to college not really knowing what I wanted to do. At the last minute I decided to major in secretarial science. It seemed the practical thing to do. With a business sense picked up from my father and a knowledge of typing and book-keeping. I expected to get an office job upon graduating from Clark. I also took some education courses because they interested me, though I had no intention of becoming a teacher.

In June of 1957 I returned to Alabama with my degree and discovered that the only office positions available to blacks were civil service jobs. None of the private companies wanted to hire a black secretary. I filled out a civil service application. I turned down the one available job because it was in Montgomery and I wasn't ready to leave home again. Still, finding some kind of job was a matter of pride. After the way people had chided my father about paying my way to Clark, I was not about to let that degree collect dust.

I finally found a job teaching typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, and business law at Monroe County Training School, and considered myself fortunate. In those days teaching jobs were hard to come by in Alabama. Teachers seemed to live and die in their jobs. More than a proper occupation for a woman, teaching was one of the only occupations at the time for an educated black woman. For all my attempts to be different, I finally had to settle for that. I had to accommodate myself to the realities of life in Alabama.

Some things are meant to be.

From the very first day, I felt comfortable teaching. With some experience conducting Sunday school classes at church. I was used to standing up and speaking before a group. I liked being around people, working with them and helping them understand things. I had always been fascinated with learning, with the process of discovering something new, and it was exciting to share in the

discoveries made by my tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students at Monroe County Training School.

I didn't know anything about educational theory, and I have often thought that worked in my favor. Without preconceived ideas and not bound by rules. I was forced to deal with my students as individuals, to talk to them, listen to them, find out their needs. I wasn't trying to see how they fit into any learning patterns or educational models. I followed my instincts and taught according to what felt right. I bought my own experiences to the classroom, trying to figure out how I had learned as a student. I remembered what had bored me and what had interested me, which teachers I had liked and which ones I had disliked, and applied it all to my teaching.

Not having any formal theory or textbook methodology to follow made me receptive to new ideas. I was constantly learning along with my students, always looking for new ways to make a lesson more exciting. My colleagues were very helpful offering suggestions and sharing their methods. They all seemed to care so much about their students. I may have been naive or too idealistic, but at the time the whole teaching profession seemed inspiring.

The principal at Monroe really taught me how to teach. He was especially hard on new teachers. He sat in my classroom every day for two months observing, shaking or nodding his head and taking notes. After class he would sit me down and lecture me as though I were one of the children. He told me to go to the point of a lesson more directly. He would say, "Well, you lost the boy in the third seat of the last row." He trained me to watch the students' faces, to see by their eyes if they understand. I learned that a good teacher knows the students, not just the subject.

After two years at Monroe I liked teaching but wasn't ready to commit myself. I was immature. Staying with my father on weekends and with my grandparents during the week, I was still too unsettled to dedicate myself fully to anything.

As a teacher I now try to teach children how to deal with life. More than reading, writing, and arithmetic, I want to give them a philosophy for living. But at twenty-one I was too sheltered and too

protected to know how to deal with life myself. Though I earned a salary, my father continued to give me spending money——which I continued to accept——and he bought me expensive clothes, did everything for me. He even warmed up my car in the morning and filled the gas tank at the pump behind his store.

At some point my dependence on my father began to bother me. I felt constricted by small-town lift. After four years in Atlanta I found Monroeville too confining. It was time to grow up and be on my own.

Chapter 4.

In June 1959, at the close of the school year, I left for Chicago to visit my grandmother's cousin, Annie Townsend, for a two month vacation. I did not plan on getting a job, finding a husband, starting a family, and settling down in Garfield Park.

After a few days in Chicago, I got tired of being a tourist. On an impulse I read through the want ads in the newspaper and applied for a job as a medical secretary at Mount Sinai Hospital. I was hired. I didn't know anything about medicine, but I began teaching myself Latin to understand the medical terms. The job was so exciting I decided to stay in Chicago. I took an apartment in a large, U-shaped courtyard building on Hamlin Avenue, overlooking Garfield Park. It was a small apartment with a Murphy bed and a sunny kitchen. It seemed elegant to me, but the best part was that this place was truly my own. My first apartment was close to the hospital, close to Cousin Annie, and close to Clarence Collins.

Clarence lived with his parents next door to Cousin Annie. I was first attracted to him by his devotion to his family. He was one of eleven children, eight boys and three girls, a close-knit family. When I met Clarence, he was working as a draftsman in the Sunbeam Appliance Company, a job he would keep for close to twenty years. While he did not have a college education and was not as well-read as I, he was just as determined. He was also more level-headed. And he was kind and gentle. All the neighborhood children gathered ground him, and several went with us to Riverview Amusement Park on our first date. I knew that any man who could be so patient with someone else's children was bound to be a good father and a good husband. Within a year we were married.

I continued to work as a secretary, but soon I missed teaching. I missed the classroom. I missed the excitement of helping students discover the solution to a problem, of seeing the pieces fit together.

I went downtown to the Board of Education and filled out a teaching application. All I had to do was send for my college

transcripts and my Alabama teaching credentials. Since I had not taken methodology courses, I was not eligible to take the certification exam. It didn't matter because teachers in the Chicago school system didn't have to be certified. There was a teacher shortage at that time, so as long as you had a college degree, you could teach. If you weren't certified, you worked as a full-time-basis substitute which meant you were assigned to a school but had no seniority and were not guaranteed permanent placement. Years later the Chicago Teachers' Union pressured the school board to grant automatic certification to those who had been in the school system for three years.

I received a letter telling me to report to Calhoun South Elementary School on Jackson Boulevard, where I was given a second grade class. I didn't have any experience teaching such young children, but I assumed the principles were the same as in teaching older students. I had to motivate the children, create a desire for learning. I had to make them understand why it was important to learn. And I had to make them feel worthwhile and confident.

I drew on my own childhood memories, recalling the things that had made me feel happy, sad, excited, hurt, or afraid, the things that made me want to laugh or cry. And I tried to be sensitive to those feelings in my students. I found that hugging and touching and saying "I love you" immediately made them feel secure and comfortable in the classroom, establishing a bond between us and also among the children.

Children are quick to mimic adults. If a teacher ridicules or picks on a child, chances are the children will pick on each other. And of course the reverse is true.

At first I followed the Board of Education curriculum. Soon I thought the work was way below the children's ability. They could learn much more. So I expanded the curriculum. If a lesson called for the children to locate all the triangles on a page and color them in with crayons. I would tell the children to put a green capital D above the second triangle and to color the fourth triangle red and the seventh one blue. Then I would have them write the words red

and blue above those triangle. The children were learning not only to recognize shapes but to follow directions, to think, to count, to distinguish colors, and to write. The group activity also kept them more attentive than they would have been if I had left them alone to work quietly by themselves.

After a few weeks my students were bored with the required second grade reader. I couldn't blame them. There were no real stories in those books, nothing to occupy a child's mind or stimulate thought. The pages were filled with pictures of boys and girls playing, and below the pictures were sentences like "Run, Pepper, run" and "See Pepper run." There was no reason for the children to bother reading the words. All they had to do was look at the pictures.

Never having taught second grade before, I didn't know very much about how to teach reading. I didn't know about the debate between advocates of the phonics method, in which children learn to decode vowel and consonant sounds in a word, and the look-say method, in which they identify words with pictures and build a "sight vocabulary" by reading sentences that use the same words over and over. It seemed to me that the natural thing to do was teach the children to sound out words. That was how I had learned to read, so that was what I taught my second graders. I disregarded the teaching guide, which followed the look-say method.

It seemed to me that the children would be more anxious to read if they were interested in what they were reading. I didn't have any expert studies to go by. It was just common sense. Why would a child want to put out the effort just to read "See Pepper run"? I stopped using the required reader and brought in books from the library and from bookstores. My children read from Aesop's Fables, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Hans Christian Andersen, La Fontaine's Fables, and Leo Tolstoy's Fables and Fairytales. I chose those stories because they teach values and morals and lessons about life. Fairy tales and fables allow children to put things in perspective——greed, trouble, happiness, meanness, and joy. After reading those stories you have something to think over and discuss. More than anything, I wanted my students to be excited about reading. I wanted them to

understand that reading is not an exercise in memorizing words but a way to bring ideas to light.

I had my students draw their own pictures to illustrate the stories. Sometimes we acted out the fable, or we made up our own ending. We even composed our won fables. I would start and then each child would add a sentence. I felt my way along, trying out new ideas and experimenting with different methods and lesions. And I loved it. I loved watching my students' faces when they discovered the solution to a math problem or recognized on their won the parallel between two stories. There was an effervescent quality to their excitement.

I taught at Calhoun for a year, leaving when I became pregnant with our first son, Eric. I knew I would go back to teaching.

While I was at Calhoun, Clarence and I bought a gray-stone two-flat at 3819 West Adams Street. It was down the street from Delano Elementary School and just around the corner from my apartment on Hamlin Avenue.

Garfield Park was a nice, respectable neighborhood of mostly Jewish, Italian, and Irish families. We were one of the first black families to move in. Looking back, I suppose I should have realized hwo fast the neighborhood was changing. The bank on Madison Street closed down. Steel grates appeared across some of the storefronts at night, and there were "For Rent" signs in many of the shop windows. At the time I didn't know anything about changing neighborhoods. I had grown up in a town where people mostly stayed in the same place all their lives.

In 1962, a year after we moved into the house, Eric was born. Three years later we had a second son, Patrick, and in 1968 our daughter Cynthia came along. By that time Garfield Park had turned into another Chicago ghetto. Prostitutes and street gangs stakes out the area. There were razed lots boarded-up windows, and vacant buildings. The worst destruction took place in April 1968 during the riots that followed Martin Luther King's death. People went crazy. They ran through the streets breaking windows, looting, and setting building on fire. It was terrifying. We locked ourselves in the house for days. When the rioting was over, there wasn't much of anything

left in Garfield Park. All the stores were closed down. Clarence had to walk nearly a mile to get a gallon of milk.

With small children and a growing family Clarence and I simply could not afford to move away from Garfield Park. A lot of our friends began to move away. Maybe it was my rebel streak, but the more I saw people run off and forget about their old friends and neighbors, the more I resolved to stay, even later when we had enough money. I had put down roots in Garfield Park, and I wasn't going to give up that easily.

In the years since then I have been fighting an attitude, the apathy. No one seemed to have any pride anymore. I don't understand what happens to people in urban areas like Garfield Park. In Alabama the poor blacks used to wash down every inch of their unpainted wooden shacks with Octagon Laundry Soap. They swept under their porches, even if they didn't have store-bought brooms. They cut down branches from trees and tied them together with rags or string to make brushbrooms. People in Alabama would shake their heads in disgust if they saw a dirty mop hanging out to dry on someone's porch railing, or graying sheets dangling from a clothesline. My mother used to say you can just look outside a person's house and tell what he is.

The one thing everyone in Alabama had was pride. That pride was a consistent part of a southern upbringing. The poor children came to school with neatly sewn patches on their clothes. Their clothes may have been old, but they were clean. If your children were dirty, you didn't belong anywhere in the social order of the town. If you had a dirty water bucket, you were a disgrace, and if you drank from the dipper instead of a glass, you were considered a heathen. If you didn't mow your lawn or clip your hedges, you were ostracized. When the neighbor next door saw you mowing your lawn, he would mow his. And on Sundays, after the church services, each family set out a picnic dinner and everyone saw who could have the best food. If your dinner didn't spread out well, you were disgraced.

Neighborhoods like Garfield Park are made up mostly of people from the South, like myself. I don't understand why my southern

pride stuck while theirs didn't. Part of the problem is that people are looking for easy solutions. They have been led to believe that someone else is going to do things for them. Too many black people have fallen into the pattern of listening to the self-proclaimed leaders who find it in their own best interest to make people feel there are "free rides" in this world. If so many foreign immigrants could come to America and make it, so can people like those in Garfield Park. But unfortunately, so many blacks are waiting for white America to be their Messiah.

I don't think politicians are going to change things. And I don't think marching or violent protest accomplished anything in the long run. I tell my students all the time:"If you raise your fist and yell at someone today, he may give you something because he feels sorry for you or is frightened of you, but what are you going to do tomorrow and the next day and ten years from now? "

I am convinced that the real solution is education. We have to teach children self-reliance and self-respect. We have to teach them the importance of learning, or developing skills, of doing for themselves. I am always reminding my students that if you give a man a fish, he will eat for only a day. If you teach him how to fish, he will feed himself for a lifetime. That's why I stay in Garfield Park. The legacy I want to leave behind is a generation of children who realize that you can't get something for nothing, who are proud and resourceful enough to take care of their own. In this messed up world, the only children who are going to make something of themselves are those who come from strong parents or those who have had a strong teacher. One or the other. Or both.

I went back to teaching in February 1963, when my son Eric was six months old. I didn't like leaving him with a baby sitter all day. But I had to work. Without my salary, we had a hard time meeting the mortgage. Fortunately, I was assigned to Delano Elementary School, just down the street from my house. It enabled me to come home at lunchtime or in case of an emergency. I had a sixth grade class the first year, a second grade class the next, and later I settled in as a second grade teacher. Except for two brief maternity leaves when Patrick and Cindy were born, I stayed at

Delano for several years. The job at Delano offered the best of all worlds. Eventually it turned into a nightmare, not because of the students but because of the other teachers.

When I started at Delano I was impressed by the principal, an older German man, a classical scholar who read the Iliad to students during lunchtime. He held faculty workshops where he recited Donne, Yeats, and Byron, stopping in the middle of a poem to ask his teachers to supply the next line. When they couldn't, he waved his hand with disgust and said, "Some of you aren't worth a Sam Hill." I learned a lot from him, and I began teaching poetry and classical literature to my students. Above all the principal taught me that a good teacher is one who continue to learn along with the students.

I got along well with most of the teachers at first, particularly the older ones whom I learned from. I used to sit at lunch with a woman from Arkansas and discuss ways to get children to like reading. Her advice to me was to involve the children in the story and never to let them stare passively at words on a page. She told me to have them take the place of one of the characters in a story and then ask them questions about what they thought and felt. She also suggested that I have the children write a letter to one of the characters. To this day I find those are excellent ways to get a child excited about a story.

Over the years the faculty at Delano changed. Some teachers retired, some transferred to other schools voluntarily, some were shifted around the city by the administrative bureaucracy. Their replacements were a different breed of teachers, people who really didn't care or know what they were doing. Several were young men who became teachers to avoid the draft and Vietnam. Many others were quick to admit they didn't really want to teach but couldn't think of anything else to do. All they wanted was to get by.

A new principal came to Delano. He didn't pay much attention to what went on in the classrooms, as long as things were quiet and orderly. Practically the only time he came into my room was to tell me the shades on the windows weren't even. He said it made a poor impression on people passing by the school. One time he interrupted

a child reciting Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice" to tell me I had better get my class outside for the fire drill. It was the sixth fire drill in two days. On his way out the principal walked over to one of my girls and told her she could not sit in class with her shoes off. What do a child's shoes have to do with her brains? That child had created havoc in two other classrooms. Finally she had settled down to learn.

The longer I taught in the public school system, the more I came to think that schools were concerned with everything but teaching. Teaching was the last priority, something you were supposed to do after you collected the milk money, put up the bulletin boards——which must never display spring flowers in January or a leftover winter scene in March——straightened the shades and desks, filled out forms in triplicate, punched all the computer cards with pre-test and post-test scores, and charted all the reading levels so they could be shipped downtown to the Board of Education. Everybody was test crazy. It seemed as though the administrators only wanted to probe IQs and rank test scores. It didn't matter whether the children learned anything at all. Nothing was important except their performance on standardized tests. Teachers were supposed to teach skills specifically for those tests. The strange thing was that if a child didn't learn, no one held the teachers responsible. If an eighth-grader didn't know how to read, no one went back to that child's first, second, or third grade teacher to ask what went wrong. No, it was always the child's fault.

I couldn't stand all that. I couldn't stand the pretense that there was teaching going on, that children were getting an education. The children were merely being pushed ahead, unprepared, to make room for more failures. They couldn't read and they couldn't write, but they were passed along to the next grade anyway.

I became convinced that the many poor readers in the Chicago school system were casualties of the look-say method of teaching reading. The method was first used in the 1830s in teach deaf-mutes to read. Then some educators, including Horace Mann, had the bright idea of introducing the look-say or whole-word or sight-reading method into the public schools, reasoning that if deaf

children could learn to read by this, then surely it would make reading simpler for all children. By the 1920s sight-reading was adopted by many school systems and accepted nationwide. It has been popular ever since. Rudolf Fiesch's 1955 classic Why Johnny Can't Read argued that the look-say method with its Dick-and-Jane books was producing generations of children who couldn't read, couldn't spell, and had no sense of grammar. His argument didn't dissuade many schools. Neither did the growing number of illiterate children.

I could never understand how anyone expected a child to learn to read by recognizing "sight" words. Take away the pictures that illustrate the words and the familiar word sequence, and reading turns into guesswork. With the look-say method a child is taught to memorize a controlled vocabulary. He or she isn't taught the rules for vowel and consonant sounds, so the child can't figure out new words independently. For example, learning the word look without learning the double o sound, the child is helpless when confronted with took or book. He or she has to wait to memorize those words later on.

Rather than have a child rely on a memorized vocabulary, I always thought it better to teach a child how to attack a word phonetically. Over the years I saw that children became better readers and spellers when they learned by phonics. But they had to learn intensive phonics——all the regular and irregular sound patterns in the English language——not some bootleg version for sounding our the first and last letters of a word. I saw that if a child knew the rules for vowel and consonant sounds and for syllabification, and the exceptions to the rules, then that child could pick up anything and read it.

So I didn't follow the look-say teaching guide. In fact I went beyond the required curriculum in many of my lessons. For example, I taught my students how to add and subtract, but I also taught them that arithmetic is a Greek word meaning to count and that numbers were called digits after the Latin word digitus, meaning finger, because people used to count on their figures. I taught them about Pythagoras, who believed mathematics made a pupil perfect

and ready to meet the gods. I told them what Socrates said about straight thinking leading to straight living. I read aloud to them from The Great Quotation and 101 Famous Poems. We talked about Emerson's "Self Reliance," Bacon's "On Education," and parts of Thoreau's Walden: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer."

But I did not teach my students these things to be pedantic. I hoped that what they read and learned would affect their whole lives, teaching them how to live. I tried to introduce my children to a world that extends beyond the ghetto of Garfield Park. Until you reveal a larger world to children, they don't realize there is anything to reach for.

My approach was to teach the total child. A teacher should help develop a child's character, help build a positive self-image. I was concerned about everything——attitudes, manners, grooming. I made sure my students' faces were clean, their hair combed, their shirts tucked in, and their socks pulled up. I told them to walk with their heads up and their shoulders back, to have dignity and confidence. And I cautioned them that what a person thinks of himself will determine his destiny. Those were the things my parents told me, and I still believe them.

I was brought up to follow my own convictions and not to change myself in order to please others. But because I did things my own way, the other teachers at Delano resented me. I faced that same kind of problem my whole life. My strong will always seemed to distance me from people, even when I was a child.

At Delano the hardest battle I ever fought was to be me. Somehow, everything I did annoyed my colleagues, from the way I dressed to the way I taught. As more criticism began to build up, they even questioned my intentions. I drew away from them, becoming completely absorbed in my teaching. However, my retreat only made things worse. When I kept to myself, the other teachers were offended by my standoffishness.

Each year, I became more discontented at Delano. Apart from the politics——the bickering and pettiness among teachers over who got which students, who got supplies, who was going to work recess

or lunch duty——I was frustrated like so many teachers in so many schools by the bureaucracy, the record keeping, the "Up the Down Staircase" syndrome. Where do they find all the minutia that keeps you from teaching?

The curriculum changed with the passing of each fad. And the textbooks changed. Somebody, somewhere decided to water them down. Textbooks where being written two years below the grade level they were intended for. Why? Because students couldn't read. Instead of challenging students with materials that might improve their skills, the new books made it easier, using more pictures and fewer words. And simpler words. One textbook that used enormous and apprehension in a story came out in a revised edition that replaced those words with big and fear. The standards fell lower and lower.

I never thought I'd look back to the 1860s with awe. I came across a Rhetorical Reader published in 1862 that included works by John Ruskin, Oliver Goldsmith, John Milton and Leo Tolstoy. It was intended for children in elementary school. Today these classical works are considered too difficult. Even the vocabulary in the first grade readers has been reduced. A first grade reader from 1920 introduced 345 new words. Today one of the most popular first grade readers introduced only fifty-three words for the entire year. Yet a child starting school at age five already has a vocabulary of about 4,000 words.

There is a lot of money to be made from miseducation, from the easy to read easy to learn textbooks, workbooks, teacher manuals, educational games and visual aids. The textbook business is more than a billion-dollar-a-year industry and some of its biggest profits come from "audio-visual aids"——flash cards, tape cassettes, and filmstrips. No wonder the education industry encourages schools to focus on surface education.

Quite a few of my Delano colleagues felt the same way I did about the school system, but most were apathetic and afraid to make waves. That included the principal. Principals by nature are forever looking for harmony. Often they only want to serve their stint in a school as peacefully and with as few complications as possible,

aspiring to a job in the district office. They handle their faculty with kid gloves, afraid of giving unfavorable year-end evaluations and afraid of adding an extra student to a classroom. The last thing in the world any principal wants is trouble with the teachers' union.

All of this added to my frustrations. After a certain point I became more outspoken, which seemed to isolate me even further from the other teachers. If I complained about the textbooks and curriculum, they were annoyed. If I complained about the excessive number of fire drills or the dirty lunchroom conditions or the lack of toilet paper in the student washrooms, they chided me for wasting time at the faculty meetings. They told me to close the door to my classroom and forget about it. But I couldn't.

Eventually, the tension deepened. Whenever I walked into the teachers' lounge, there was an uncomfortable and mean silence. The other teachers, sitting on the sofas drinking coffee and swapping stories about their students, cut their conversations short the moment I entered. Though I have always felt pretty confident of myself, I wasn't immune to their coldness. I hated feeling like an outcast. It brought back the same pain I experienced as a child when my classmates poked fun at my fancy clothes or ridiculed me for being tall and awkward. I didn't know how to make peace with my colleagues. I just wasn't good at small talk. It bothered me to sit around talking about some boy who was repeating sixth grade for the third time or about a new transfer student who had been to seven other schools without learning how to write his name. those things weren't funny to me. I used to hear some teachers say "I hate these damn kids." That comment would destroy me. As a mother I would hate to think I had gone through the trouble of getting my children dressed and fed and sent them off to a school where the teacher's attitude was "I hate these damn kids." No matter what it cost me personally, I couldn't be like that.

It was a depressing situation. Several times I thought about looking for a job in another school, but I didn't want to teach in another part of the city. I wanted to work with the children in my neighborhood. By September 1974 I had resolved to survive by concentrating on my students. The new semester got off to a great

start, and by the sixth week of school my students were eager for learning. I felt it was going to be a terrific year.

Chapter 5

Marva stood in the doorway welcoming the children as they squeezed past her into the classroom. "I love your sweater," she told one of the boys. "Hello, sweetheart," she said, her large hand cupping a girl's chin, "who fixed your hair in such beautiful braids? She told a boy who tried to push ahead of the others. "What good-looking shoes you have. Tie the laces, darling, so you don't fall and hurt yourself." Marva made sure she found something to praise in each of the children every day, even if it was nothing more than the color of their socks, a new pencil, a bright smile, or a good job of washing the back of their neck.

The children scrambled to their seats and began rummaging through their desks, putting lunches inside and taking out papers and pencils. Four boys huddled in the back of the room making plans for after school. A girl in the front row was combing her hair. Passing the child on her way to the blackboard, Marva took the comb from the girl's hand.

"Darling, put the comb away. Do you see me combing my hair in class? Do what you see me do. We don't comb our hair in public. How would it look if I came to class with a wet washrag and starting wiping my face? Washing our faces and combing our hair and brushing our teeth are all the things we do in private."

Marva looked around the room, saw that everyone was present, and began. "Who can tell me what homonyms are?"

"The second bell didn't ring yet," complained Jerome. Jerome was like a nagging conscience, forever calling Marva's attention to points of order——pinpointing where they had left off in a story the previous day, reminding Marva to collect homework, notifying her that it was five minutes before lunchtime and the class should start putting away their books.

"Do you need a bell to tell your brain to start working?" Marva asked. "There was a Russian scientist named Ivan Pavlov, P-a-v-l-o-v." Marva wrote the name on the board, pointing out the short vowel

sounds. “Pavlov tried the experiment of ringing a bell every time food was given to a dog. Pretty soon the dog learned that a ringing bell meant he would get some food. The dog associated the bell with food. What did the dog do? The dog associated the bell with food.”

She printed the word associated on the board with its phonetic spelling. “The base word is associate. German schwa sound on the a, then macron o, macron e, macron a. Associate. And what does associate mean? ”

Marva directed her question at Jerome. “Baby, what does associate mean? The dog associated the bell with the food. The bell made the dog do what? Think about the——”

“Think about the food,” Jerome answered.

“Very good. Associate means that one thing makes you think about something else. Associate means to connect or join together. We associate Halloween with pumpkins. We associate Santa Claus with Christmas.

“Now Dr. Pavlov’s dog associated the bell with the food. It became such a habit that his mouth watered when he heard a bell, even if he was not given any food. The bell rang and the dog acted hungry. Jerome, you don’t need a bell to tell you that you are hungry. Do you? Of course you don’t. you’re bright enough to know that by yourself. You don’t need a bell to tell you when to start thinking either.”

In the past six weeks, since the semester had begun, Marva’s students had become used to these digressions. She never reprimanded a saucy remark like the one Jeromo had made. She saw it as a test, a personal challenge. She liked to think she could transform anything into a learning experience.

A boy who kicked a classmate while going out to recess had to look up the etymology of the word kick and report his findings to the class. When Wanda Lewis was chewing bubble gum and popped an enormous bubble all over her chin and nose, Marva had her look up the history of gum chewing and tell the class all about chicle and sapodilla trees.

The incident sparked a classroom discussion of botany, geography, and international trade, Marva told her students that

sapodilla trees are evergreens, which differ from deciduous trees like the maples, oaks, and elms that grow in Garfield Park, because evergreens don't lose their leaves in the autumn. She pulled down the large world map and showed her class Mexico, Central America, and the tropical area of South America where the sapodillas grow. She went on to explain how these countries sell the chicle from the trees to the United States in exchange for goods they don't have—— "The word we use is export."

It was typical of the spontaneous lessons Marva treated her class to daily. Nothing was irrelevant if it could be used to pique a child's intellectual curiosity.

Just as quickly as she had begun it, Marva dropped the discussion of Pavlovian psychology and brought the class back to the lesson on homonyms.

"Homonyms are like twins, but they are not identical twins," she said. "They are words that sound alike but have different middle vowels and different meanings. Anthony, use the homonyms meet and meat in sentences."

"Meet you next week?" answered Anthony, a small quiet boy, the kind of child who is easily overlooked in a classroom.

"Use a complete sentence, sweetheart. We must always speak in complete sentences. Can I meet you, when?"

"Can I meet you next week, Mrs. Collins?" Anthony replied.

"Very, very good."

"Mrs. Collins, Mrs. Collins," Freddie Harris shouted, stretching his arm as high as he could and bouncing in his seat. "I've got one. I've got one."

"All right, Freddie," Marva asked, "why don't you give us a sentence using the word meat, the homonym with ea?"

"Dr. Pavlov's dog eats meat," Freddie said, sitting back in his seat very pleased with himself.

"Oh, you are so bright, so bright," Marva told him. "I can't believe no one ever told you what a brilliant child you are."

Marva had guessed the story of Pavlov's dog would find its way into the lesson. That was her method, to pool as much information as possible, to bombard the children with names and facts and

anecdotes they could draw upon later. Of course the children wouldn't remember everything. Exposure to knowledge was what mattered. Some of it would sink in.

The children were learning their sounds. Each day in unison, like yogis chanting their mantras, the children followed Marva's lead, repeating the vowel sounds, the consonants, and the consonant blends——br, bl, tw, spr.

To a beat of one-two, one-two-three, they worked on the long vowel sounds:"a, e——I, o, u. I like reading, how about you?" Next they did the short vowel sounds, which Marva believed were especially troublesome for black children to pronounce:"at, et, it, ot, ut. Let's push the last door shut."

To link the sounds with spelling Marva printed several example words on the board.

"The vowel sound is a and the word is ate. The vowel sound is a and the word is tail. The vowel sound is a and the word is may. The vowel sound is a and the word is straight. The vowel sound is a and the word is eight."

The class picked up the rhythm of motion and sound, and soon the excitement of a revival meeting spread through the room. The chorus of voices rose and fell accompanied by bobbing heads and clapping hands. The energy was contagious.

"Play and stay. Play and stay," they sang. "I see two vowels, one, two. I see two vowels, one, two . I see two vowels and the sound is a. The word is play."

So it went through the long and the short vowel sounds and then the consonants, each with an associative key. The letter b was the heart beat sound; c and k were copycats, both sounding like cracking nuts; d was a knock on the door, f a fighting cat; g a croaking frog; h a running boy panting. They chanted down the list to z, a buzzing bee.

Heart beat, heart beat, bh, bh, bh
Cracking nub, Cracking nub, ck, ck, ck
Knock on the door, Knock on the door, dh,dh,dh
Fighting cat, Fighting cat, fff, fff, fff
Croaking frog, Croaking frog, gh, gh, gh

Running boy, Running boy, huh, huh, huh

Marva clapped her hands to keep up the pace, sustaining the children's energy and excitement. When they had finished, Marva praised her children, reminding them, "If you know the vowel and consonant rules, you will be able to spell and read every word."

By November, I saw the daily regimen of phonics drills beginning to work. It was a tedious, repetitive method of teaching reading, tedious for me as well as for the children. But there was no substitute for its effectiveness. The rhythmic tapping and hand clapping relieved some of the monotony. Before long the children were almost as familiar with the chanting of vowel and consonant sounds as they were with the jingles on television commercials or the songs on the latest Stevie Wonder album. Once in a while, I would hear some of my students in the lunchroom or in the hallway singing their own jazzed up versions of "Cracking nut, cracking nut, ck, ck, ck. Buzzing bee, buzzing bee, zzz, zzz, zzz."

In class the children were now blending vowels and consonants and sounding out words. They were beginning to read, using the text Reading Is Fun, the first book in the phonics-first series published by Open Court Publishing Company. The former principal at Delano had ordered the books year before and had encouraged his teachers to experiment with them. Most of the teachers declined, feeling that the Open Court books were too hard for their children. When the new principal took over, the phonics-first readers were packed away in the storeroom.

I liked the Open Court series because the poetry and story selections aimed to teach values as well as vocabulary.

Say well and do well

End with the same letter.

To way well is fine,

To do well is better.

Like the old McGuffey Reader, the Open Court series taught a lot more than "Look, look, see me." So my students worked through poems, fables, and stories like "Dick Whittington and His Cat," In addition to the selections that I read aloud to them daily right after lunch. The children sponged up information as though they were on

their way to a children's version of College Bowe. They knew that trolls and elves came from Scandinavia, pixies lived in England, leprechauns came from Ireland, goblins were found in France, and poltergeists were noisy little German spirits. They learned that there are 343 different versions of the Cinderella story and that the first was printed in China in the year 340.

The book you give to a child who is learning to read determines what he or she will read later on. If we give children the boring Dick-and-Jane type of stories, how can we spark their curiosity in further reading? Fairy tales and fables whet a child's appetite for more reading, and they are an excellent means for teaching the rudiments of literary analysis. In fairy tales there is always a conflict or problem, the forces of good poised against the forces of evil. I teach my students to identify the protagonist and the antagonist. I also point out that in fairy tales there are often elements of three——three bears, three pigs, three wishes. Cinderella's three nights at the ball. I explain that the number three is widely symbolic, representing many things. One example I usually give is the three parts to our personality——the id, the ego, and the super-ego. I tell the children that the id is the person we are when we are first born, before we learn anything. The ego is our present self, the person we think we are. And the super-ego is our conscience, the person we feel we should be.

Even young children love to analyze a story this way, working out a puzzle and seeing how all the pieces fit together. The children suggest other associations for the number three, such as three strikes to an out in baseball or three meals a day. The search for connections between what they read and what they see around them gets the children's minds clicking for classroom discussion, which is the heart of the lesson. I remind my students that they each have an opinion and that their opinions are important. I don't tell them what to think. I try to teach them how to think. It is useful in these discussions to introduce a question without a clear-cut answer, a question to stimulate critical thinking. Did Goldilocks have the right to go into someone's house without permission? Was she right to destroy the bear's beds and eat their food?

To limber up their minds, I put my students through warm-up exercises. During an arithmetic lesson, for example, I might ask, "If it takes me three minutes to boil one egg in a pot of water, how long will it take me to boil two eggs?" Someone usually pops up, "We don't know times yet." Another student might verture, "It'll take two times as long."

I say, "You're going to have overcooked eggs if you do that. Stop and think. If I'm putting an egg in some water and bringing that water to a boil, what difference will it make if I put in two eggs instead of one? It will take the same amount of time for the eggs to cook, won't it?" The object is to get children to think, use not only book knowledge but common sense. Sometimes, I give my students incomplete questions with facts deliberately omitted. I do this to teach them how to evaluate information and to get them to realize that not every question can be answered. They eventually learn to tell me there isn't enough information.

The progress being made by Marva's students became obvious, one day, during a discussion of "Jack and the Beanstalk."

"Well, what about Jack?" Marva asked. "What kind of character do you think Jack is?"

"That Jack, he was sure dumb," said Chris.

"Yeah," laughed Freddie, "messing with that old giant. He could have been dead for sure."

"So you don't think he should have taken the chance and gone to the giant's castle?" Marva asked.

"I think he shoulda gone 'cause he got his daddy back and his daddy's things," Bernette replied.

"Aw, all he was thinking about was swiping those things," Freddied argued. "How'd he know for sure the money and the hen with the eggs was his dad's?"

"Were his dad's, darling." Marva corrected.

"Yeah, they were his dad's."

"He was no good," agreed Jerome, sitting back in his chair with his arms crossed on his chest. "He was just lazy, He didn't want to do no work, see, so he's looking to get by. Like you always telling us,

Mrs. Collins, he's the one with his hand out looking for something he don't earn."

"He went begging the lady giant for food," whispered Anthony. A second later he seemed startled to realize that he had answered in class.

"Anthony, aren't we getting so brilliant!" exclaimed Marva.

"Shoot, I still think Jack was dumb," burst out Chris, who had been shaking his head during the other comments. "You don't give away no cow for some beans some dude says is magic till you make him show you how they work. Man, that Jack was getting set up!"

Chris was raising a whole new issue from the story. There was no holding them back now.

The dedicated teacher knows that feeling of epiphany, when all the pulling and pushing and coaxing and laboring over lessons finally take effect and the children go on their own. Marva watched the children's eagerness, thinking what a long road it had been to bring them to this point of openness. That first day of school they were shells of children with toughened faces and glassed-over eyes, devoid of hope and joy. Now they had enthusiasm.

"I don't know what St. Peter has planned for me," she said, "but you children are giving me my heaven on earth."

Naturally my optimum goal was to get the children in this class to see the intrinsic value of an education, so that they would want to learn for the sake of learning. That would come eventually. They were still seven, eight, and nine years old. While I had no use for bribes, I strongly believed in rewards. Praise——every day for every task——was the main incentive. But every so often, when it was earned and unsolicited, a little something more didn't hurt.

My students had been working hard, so I arranged for them to visit a local fast-food restaurant. We had been studying a science unit on how man gets his food, and the field trip seemed to fit right in. The owner agreed to take the children on a behind-the scenes tour of the restaurant, showing them how food was prepared and how the business was run, treating each of them afterward to lunch. I had already cleared everything with the principal, who said it was a

fine idea. “Those kids are always eating that junk food,” he laughter. ”Maybe they’ll get a chance to see what goes into it.”

This franchise restaurant was using a clown in its advertising campaign, and at 11 A.M. the clown came to class to lead the children to the restaurant. They were all squeals and giggles as they left Delano, though they were trying awfully hard to act like mature ladies and gentlemen. Tripping and shoving were kept to a minimum as the children attempted to heed my reminder that they were all ambassadors of the school and must be on their best behavior.

Just as our procession was turning the corner, the principal came rushing down the sidewalk, calling to me to stop. He was clutching his suit jacket together to keep it from flapping. He looked more out of sorts than usual.

“Marva, you can’t go,” he said, panting. “You have to bring your class back to the building. I’ve got a lot of trouble with the other teachers. They’re giving me a hard time about letting you go.”

“But you already gave permission.” I said.

“I know, I know, but I didn’t expect it to cause such a fuss.”

“Look at these children, look how excited they are. I am not going to disappoint them. When you make a promise to children, you keep it, or you don’t promise in the first place. ”

So I continued on to the restaurant with my children. I had to pay dearly for that decision. The principal apparently went back and said he had not given me permission to take my class on the outing. From then on it was open warfare with the faculty.

Someone started the rumor that I beat my students into behaving. When my second-graders were studying a science unit about dinosaurs, I posted their papers on the bulletin board outside the class, and some teachers spread the word that I had made up those papers myself. They said it was impossible for my students to write about the brontosaurus and the pterodactyl and the tyrannosaurus when their own classes were still struggling with the first thirteen words in the basal reader.

The harassment kept up. Twice I found hate notes in my school mailbox:”You think you’re so great. We think you’re nothing.” They were signed “A Colleague.”

Some days, standing at the blackboard, I felt dizzy. I began to have trouble sleeping at night. There was a pulsating pressure against the sides of my head. I would sit up suddenly unable to breathe, gasping and then exhaling in quick spurts. I felt like I was dying.

I spent most of my time wondering what it would be like if I quit teaching altogether. I knew I would have to find another job. Even with my teaching salary we had barely enough money. A lot of it were to pay for summer camps and private schools for Eric, Patrick, and Cindy. As it was, Clarence had to work two jobs, getting up at 2 A.M. to mix cement at a construction site before going to his regular job at Sunbeam. I often typed medical reports on Saturdays to bring in extra cash. It would have been much easier if I had enrolled my children at Delano, but by the time Eric was old enough for school I had already been teaching at Delano for more than four years, and I realized that that school would never provide the kind of education I wanted for my children.

I was sure there were other things besides teaching. I considered finding a job in an office, working for a textbook publisher, or writing for one of the newspapers. I wrote some letters of inquiry, but it was no use. Every time I had an idea, it was driven from my head by one prevailing thought——there was no way I could leave the children in my class. Not in the middle of the year. Not when they had just come alive. Continuity was so important for these children.

I didn’t think I could endure the tension much longer. I was tired of no one talking to me. Tired of the whole world hating me. I was glad when Christmas vacation finally came.

Chapter 6

Over the holidays, Clarence and the children did everything they could to cheer me up and get my mind off my problems at Delano. Without their support, I probably would have fallen apart completely. I've always had a quick temper and I often panicked about things. But Clarence, in his calm, comforting, common sense way, never failed to remain steady in a crisis. That was what I needed. Even my son Eric reassured me. "Now look, Mom," he said, "you're the one who's always telling us to be strong. Well, you've got to be strong yourself." He was only twelve at the time, but he already had a certain take-charge manner.

I wandered through the house trying to understand what was happening to me. For a few days I nursed self-pity. Then came the doubt, even guilt. Was I self-righteous? Too rigid? All my life I had been serious, too serious. I wished I could be more like everyone else. I even practiced being more casual about things, leaving the dinner dished overnight in the sink. I ended up washing them before I went to sleep.

When I was sure I was right about something. I just couldn't back down or even compromise. As a teacher my sympathies were only with my students. Could I have done more to understand my colleagues? I was confused. The simplest values, things I had always understood, were now complicated.

After a while I began to see that it wasn't only the conflict with the faculty that had unleashed these emotions. It was everything about today's education. The indifference and the bureaucracy had made the daily struggle to educate children that much harder. I was also frustrated as a parent. I was having trouble finding a good school for my own children, getting them a decent education.

At the time I was sending my children to a Lutheran school miles away from Garfield Park, paying taxicabs and neighbors to drive the children there and pick them up again. Yet I wasn't pleased

with the school. It was the fourth I had tried in less than seven years.

First I had sent Eric and Patrick to a Catholic school at the other end of the city. It cost $60 a month in tuition and more than $100 for a private cab to take them there. I thought it was worth it. They were getting a good basic education——Latin, grammar, and plenty of old-fashioned discipline instead of gimmicks and games.

From pre-school through first grade they had good teachers. By the time Eric was seven the school began opening up its curriculum to more "progressive" teaching methods and hiring lay teachers chiefly to attract more students. When I saw my sons doing word-picture games and coloring in workbooks rather than building their reading skills and vocabulary, I enrolled them in another school.

For all its prestige the private all-boys prep school quickly proved disappointing. Eric and Patrick were not learning phonics but were being drilled to memorize words on flash cards. They were reading from a basal text without classroom discussions, exercises, or questions to stimulate critical thinking. Worse, they were using look-say readers. Patrick, who was an eager reader when he transferred to the prep school in first grade, began to act as though a light bulb had clicked off inside. He stopped learning, he lost interest in reading, and the school tried to convince me that he needed a remedial class.

I met with the headmaster. I wanted to offer some assistance, not as an expert but as a concerned parent. I felt that if parents were willing to get involved——to help with more than fund-raising and chaperoning field trips——then maybe the children would start getting a better education. The headmaster appeared to be interested. In fact he asked me to draw up sample lesson plans and reading guides for teaching phonics. I did, though I had the feeling he was humoring me.

Nothing changed. At the end of fourth grade Eric was stumbling over words that he would have been able to sound out if he knew phonics. And Patrick was having problems reading. I worked with them in the evening, mostly trying to undo what they had done all day at school. So I told Clarence I didn't want the boys returning to

the prep school the following semester. He found it difficult to comprehend my relentless pursuit of a good school. I think he believed that somewhere along the line a normal parental concern had become a cause célèbre. He assumed that as long as his sons were attending an expensive private school, they must be getting a solid education.

I understood how easily someone who was not in education, not in the classroom working with children, might think I was overreacting. Everyone thinks a school is a place where children learn. What else is a school for? People still believe in the tradition of dedicated, self-sacrificing school teachers. They don't know how the profession has changed.

The search for a school for my own three children opened my eyes: the public schools had no monopoly on poor education. Miseducation was a problem everywhere, a galloping epidemic that was infecting every school from the city to the suburbs whether public, parochial, or private. What was once the poor man's burden had become everyone's.

With this came another realization, that I couldn't escape the problem, as a teacher or as a mother. These parts of my life were inextricably interwoven; at Delano I was fighting for the kind of education I wanted for my own children. As a parent I tended to be protective, and I always felt that same driving concern as a teacher. I could never walk out of Delano at 3:15 and leave the school and the students entirely behind me. Were my students going home or would they wander the streets? Were there clothes warm enough? Would their stomachs be full tonight and would they have sheets on their beds?

During recess I watched from the doorway to make sure no child was being picked on by classmates or excluded from games. And when I saw anyone standing off along, I took the child's hand, called the other children over, and began a new play circle. It was important to me that the children feel accepted in their group. I knew all too well what it felt like to be ostracized.

When I returned to Delano in January, I was more determined than ever to teach. Two weeks after school was back in session,

everything came crashing down.

On a Friday afternoon the principal sent up a message saying he wanted to see me immediately in his office. I couldn't imagine what was so urgent that it couldn't wait until the end of day. Did I forget to fill out some form? Was one of my students in trouble?

The principal was sitting behind his desk, looking very formal and very official. He was a short man; behind the desk he looked even smaller, swallowed up by filing cabinets and stacks of papers. He told me to sit down. I knew I wasn't going to like what he had to tell me.

He was taking my class away from me. Because of funding cuts, the school had lost some supervisory positions, so he had to put one of the master teachers back into the classroom. And he was giving her my class and switching me to another. She was retiring in June, he explained, after thirty years of teaching, and he wanted to make her last few months as easy as possible. I half-heard some backhanded compliments on how well my children were doing and how well behaved they were. She would have no problems.

What about the children? I flew upstairs to my class. My heart was pounding. I closed the door behind me, leaned against the wall, staring around the room cluttered with books, papers, posters, and plants. Some visitors might not have found it esthetically pleasing, but everything in it was for the children. My eyes went to the posters on the wall: A Winner Never Quits and a Quitter Never Wins! Winners in Life Respond Positively to Pressure. If Life Gives You Lemons, Make Lemonade. Each day the children repeated those sayings. Each day I proclaimed the message, driving home the importance of a positive attitude. I expected it of my students. Suddenly I no longer had it myself.

The children could see that Marva was upset.

"What's happening, Mrs. Collins?" Freddie asked.

"You okay, Mrs. Collins?" Anthony whispered, his brow furrowed. She rested her hands on his shoulders.

"Children, I have always been honest with you, so I'm not going to fool you now. The office is making some changes." Her grip

tightened on Anthony's shoulders. "You are going to get another teacher, and I guess I am going to get another class."

She expected the moans, the chorus of noes, and the head shaking. Tears ran down Anthony's cheeks. Freddie slammed his hand against the side of his desk, shoving it against the wall.

"I'm never coming back here!" he shouted, his lips pursed tightly together, his arms and shoulders moving in quick angry jerks. "I'm gonna break every window in this place."

"Is that what my teaching has come to? Is that what I have been doing here all these months, teaching you how to break windows and slam desks? When you go looking for a job, some employer is sure to say, 'My, my, look at this young man. He certainly is qualified for the job because he went to school and learned how to break windows and slam desks.'"

A few giggles broke the tension. Marva walked over to Freddie, pushed his desk into the row, and put her arm around him.

"I love you," she told him. "I love you all, and I am going to continue to love you and care about you and worry about you. Sometimes things happen in life that we can't do anything about. We don't let them get us down, do we? We go on doing the best we can, making something of our lives. If you stop learning, if you stop building your minds, then everything I have been teaching you is wasted. Then you will make me a failure as a teacher."

When the children had gone home, I rolled up some of my posters and packed up a few of my books and plants. I decided I'd come back for the rest or send Clarence to pick them up. Relief was beginning to wash over me.

I had seen it all. Children coming to school so dirty I had to take them into the bathroom and scrub their arms and elbows with alcohol. A parent barging into the school with an extension cord to beat a child. I had worked hard, worked until I was exhausted, trying to change it, trying to give the children something more to look forward to in life than they could see in Garfield Park. If I was as strong as I thought, then I was strong enough to admit defeat.

A student's mother walked into the room. She told me that parents had already heard about the principal switching the children

around. One of the teacher's aides had gotten the word and started making phone calls. There was a group of angry parents downstairs in the office. They were angry at the idea of disrupting two classes and sixty children just to find a place for one teacher.

While she talked, she kept her eye on the box of plants on my desk. She said, "Mrs. Collins, when you start packing up your plants, I know you're ready to go. But we want you to stay." The other parents were downstairs with the principal insisting on it.

I didn't answer. I tried to imagine the shouting and fussing in the office. The thought of the principal being swarmed over by those parents made me smile. Poor man, he never expected it. He probably figured the parents would ignore things as they usually did ——not so much because they didn't care but because so many of them were easily intimidated by teachers and school administrators. They were afraid of not knowing what to say, afraid of looking dumb, embarrassed by their own lack of education. Too often they were self-conscious about the way they talked, about the way they looked or dressed, expecting the teacher to laugh at them. I was glad the parents were taking a stand. However, I was no longer going to be involved. I had settled the matter for myself and had started to feel comfortable with my decision.

I put on my coat, turned off the lights, and closed the door of the classroom. Downstairs I heard the commotion. Hoping no one would see me, I turned and ran out of the building. I needed serenity so badly. The last thing I could have endured at that moment was fighting and arguing. What I had to do at that point was hold on to my reason, my dignity. My sense of personal identity depended on it.

That night Clarence and I talked it over, and I told him I had made up my mind to resign from Delano. He said I had to do what I thought was best, but I suspect he was more relieved than he let on. I went to bed thinking everything was finally resolved, and for the first time in weeks I slept soundly.

The next morning several parents telephoned to ask about the rumor that I was leaving. They told me if I didn't come back to

school, they weren't going to send their children back either. They would boycott the school and keep their children home.

Whether or not they meant it, I was alarmed. Things could get out of hand in a place like Garfield Park, and I was afraid a boycott would prove dangerous. Not that I doubted the parents' intentions, but I was worried that some of the older boys in the neighborhood might use it as an excuse to start trouble. I did not wish to be the cause of anything.

On Monday I returned to Delano. The principal gave me back my class and I resumed teaching. Neither the children nor I mentioned what had happened.

For me that was the end. All I wanted to do was make it through to June. I couldn't fight any longer. As the weeks and months passed, I became steadily more depressed. It got to the point that I dreaded walking into the school building. On Friday evening I was already worrying about Monday. By Sunday I was tearing through my house like a whirlwind, cleaning and scrubbing and polishing. Or I fell silent. My family had to put up with a lot of moodiness from me. I alternated between shouting, complaining, and crying. I was holding on for June.

Those last few months of the school year were the most difficult. Relief was so close, I could see it ahead. But each day was so long and painful. I gave all my remaining energy to my students. There was nothing left for me. I didn't fix my hair and often went without washing it. I stopped caring what I wore and forgot about makeup. Mornings, I would grab anything, even a pair of blue jeans. And there were times I wore the same clothes two days in a row, something I had never done before.

Naturally my students saw the change. I didn't hide my feelings from them. I told them that sometimes I hurt inside and felt like crying but it wasn't because of anything they had done. It was important that they understood because children, especially young ones, are quick to assume they are responsible for whatever might be troubling the adults around them. Sometimes the class was a kind of group therapy session. They shared their experiences, and I was open in talking about mine. I never believed a teacher should

pretend to be perfect. A teacher who never displays any human weaknesses makes children self-conscious about admitting their own. A perfect teacher, like a perfect parent, is an impossible model for a child to live up to.

Yet my students were learning, learning to read, to do math, and to exercise their minds. In September my second-graders had started out with the first book in the Open Court series; in June they finished up in the middle of the fifth grade reader. They knew of Aristotle, Aesop, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Poe, Frost, and Dickinson. If I had changed, my teaching methods had not.

On the last day of school I hugged and kissed each of the children goodbye. I gave them a list of books to read over the summer. "You are the brightest children in the whole world," I reminded them one last time, "and you must never forget that. Remember, no one can take your knowledge from you. You are the only ones who will determine whether you succeed or fail in life. You must never give up. Always try to fly."

It was past noon when I gathered my things together and walked out of Delano. The children milling around in the front of the building ran up to me, tugging at me. "I love you," I called to them, crossing the street, that was the truth; they were the only reason I had held on for those last months. But I promised myself I was never going back. As long as I lived, I would never set foot in that building again.

Chapter 7.

My departure from Delano was no great gesture of protest. I was almost thirty-nine years old. I wasn't some young upstart out to prove something to myself and to the world. I still liked teaching, but it had to be in a place where I could be comfortable. I was willing to stay in the public schools and try to make the system work, as a lot of teachers do. But I no longer had the energy to do that and take on my colleagues too.

After spending the past fourteen years learning how, I wasn't about to give up on teaching. I figured I would take the summer to unwind, and then I'd consider the other possibilities. I had a feeling things would work out.

In July a group of neighborhood women organizing a community school came to see me. Dissatisfied with the public schools, they wanted to start a private elementary school for children in the Garfield Park area. They asked me to be director. It sounded wonderful. I had some strong opinions about what a school should be, and here was the chance to apply those ideas. I accepted their offer immediately, without even considering what it took to get a school started. It seemed to me that all I needed were students, some books, and a blackboard.

None of the women knew much more about setting up a school than I did, but the president of a community college on the West Side, Daniel Hale Williams University, offered some assistance. He agreed to provide our new school with a basement classroom rent-free, and he let us use some typewriters and mimeograph machines.

Next we met with the director of the Alternative Schools Network, an organization of community-participation schools in and around Chicago. Unlike the free schools that grew out of the antiestablishment mood of the late sixties, the ASN schools evolved in the early seventies as part of the back-to-basics movement. The government-funded Alternative Schools Network paid my salary as

director and curriculum developer, and their staff showed us how to open a private school.

During the last weeks of August I raced around trying to collect books, I bought some in secondhand bookstores and borrowed others. One day when I was passing the Delano schoolyard, I noticed the trash bins were filled with books, the very books I had used with my students, the Open Court readers. None of the other teachers had any use for them. I rescued the phonics-first series from the garbage, confident that I could use them to save children from a similar fate.

On September 8, 1975 Daniel Hale Williams Westside Preparatory School opened its doors. Though we had spread the word around the neighborhood, enrollment was not overwhelming. Parents were leery of chancing a new school. Many were put off by the $60 a month tuition. I wasn't discouraged. Aristotle said, "The heights of great men were not attained by sudden flight." I would work with what I had. I had only four students, ranging from second grade to fourth grade. One of them was my daughter Cindy. If the school was going to be good enough for other children, it had to be good enough for my own.

I had thought about the effects of teaching my own children, and I decided that whatever difficulty there might be in having your mother for a teacher, it was certainly no greater tan the problems Cindy would face trying to learn in some other school. As for my sons, Eric would stay where he was because he was in eighth grade and due to graduate at the end of the year. Patrick was enrolled in a private school near Lincoln Park. I felt he would benefit by being on his own, out of the shadow of his older brother and his younger sister.

I didn't know very much about my other three students and didn't really want to know their backgrounds. Knowing a child's previous record can sway a teacher's expectations. Each child came to me with a clean slate. Still, from the initial interviews I had with the children and their parents, I could tell that each had had a problem of one kind or another.

Gary Love was angry and defensive at nine years old. He talked back to his mother and to me during the interview and made it very clear he hated school.

Eight-year-old Allen Pratt was being raised by a father who was a member of a motorcycle gang. I didn't know why Mr. Pratt enrolled his son in the school. He never told me. I suspected it may have been because he didn't have a permanent address, which might have posed a problem in registering Allen in a public school. When I asked Allen to read a sentence in the reader, he didn't even know the words and or the. On top of everything else, Allen was the dirtiest child I had ever seen. His hair was matted down; he had dried food on his mouth and chin and streaks of grease on his arms. The boy looked as though no one had washed his clothes in months.

My third students, Tracy Shanklin, was seven years old and had been passed into second grade at Delano. She couldn't read a sentence like "Sam sat at a mat," and she didn't know how to do simple addition. She was a quiet girl, very submissive and downcast. Everything about her seemed to say "I'm a nobody." Mrs. Shanklin was impatient with her daughter's progress at Delano. She enrolled Tracy in Daniel Hale Willeams Westside Preparatory after hearing about it from a woman who lived in her apartment building.

From one point of view, having so few students was an ideal teaching situation. Any teacher who had to keep track of thirty or forty children would have gladly traded placed with me. But the size also presented a problem. How would I turn four students and one classroom into a real school? I decided to use the same style of teaching I had developed at Delano. To me the four students sitting in the classroom that first morning might just as well have been forty. I was ready to teach.

Cindy was already sitting in the front row opposite Marva when the other children started to arrive. Trace Shanklin, holding her mother's hand, was the first. Her mother stood in the doorway and gave Trace a gentle nudge to go inside. The girl looked up hesitatingly, then dropped her eyes to the floor and walked into the room, heading slowly for the last seat in the last row. Mrs. Shanklin whispered to Marva that at Delano her daughter had been seated in

the back of every classroom she was in, overlooked by teachers because she was such a quiet child. It was a pattern Marva recognized repeatedly in slow learners. She hurried over to Tracy, catching her before she settled into the chair. Hugging the child close to her, Marva led her to a desk beside Cindy.

"I love you too much to have you so far away from me," Marva said. "I will be lonesome if you sit in the back of the room."

Marva was introducing Tracy to Cindy when Gary Love, big for his age, bounded into the room, swaggering and snapping his fingers behind his back, jiving to some imagined music.

"Sweetheart, is your hip broken? If it isn't, there's no reason to come in here walking that way, slopping and popping your fingers. Why don't you come sit over here?" Marva patted the back of one of the front seats.

Gary plopped into a desk in the middle of the room. "You make me."

Marva shrugged. "I don't make children do anything. You make yourself what you are. You must decide for yourself what you want to do in here, peach. You have the right to learn. You also have the right to fail, if you choose."

Marva stopped, letting him think the matter over, and went to usher Allen Pratt to a desk. She was about to put her arm around Allen when a wave of sweat hit her nose.

Turning to the others, she said, "Children, look through the books on your desk. I will be right back." She took Allen's hand, whispering. "Come with me, darling," and she led him down the hall to the women's washroom. Embarrassed, Allen refused to go inside. Marva shoved open the door, shouted hello, and waited for a response. When no one answered, she said, "It's all right, sweetheart. No one is there. You're such a handsome young man, but we can't see just how good looking you are beneath all that dirt. Let's scrub you down and find the real you."

Coaxing him over to the basin, Marva wet some paper towels, rubbing the grease and sweat off the child's neck and arms. He pulled away. She kept talking to him, asking him about his summer,

about his former school, about his father's motorcycle, anything and everything she could think of to make him relax.

When she had finished, Marva handed the boy a dry towel. "All right, tomorrow I'm going to bring you some clean clothes. Starting today and for the rest of your life, you're going to have to wash your own face."

She hugged him as they walked back to the classroom. Allen scooted into a chair. Cindy and Tracy were talking quietly and seemed to be getting along well. Gary had shunted himself off to the far left corner. From the look of the zig-zagged rows of desks, it seemed he had tried out every chair in the room before settling there. Gary's eyes were closed as his head swayed and his fingers snapped, keeping beat to a tune playing silently inside him.

"Darling, no one is going to be handing out the good jobs to someone who sits there popping his fingers," Marva said, ruffling Gary's hair. He recoiled, turning his body to the wall. "You have a right to sit there all day staring at the wall if you want. You'll never become a millionaire that way, but you can stare away if it pleases you. However, you cannot sit here snapping and tapping because you are interfering with everyone else's right to learn."

She walked up to the front of the room to commence her customary first-day-of-school per talk. In her tailored suit, hoop earrings, and high-heeled shoes, she was as imposing a figure as she had been at Delano. Daniel Hale Williams Westside Preparatory may have been a makeshift school, but there was nothing informal about the teacher or her classroom. Perhaps as a consequence of her southern background, Marva subscribed to the idea that formality established a tone and decorum that encouraged her students to see a school, regardless of its setting, as hallowed ground, a place of learning.

"You are the best and brightest children in the world and there is nothing you can't do," she began. She rated their former schools for failing them, promised that she would not let any of them fail, sympathized with their fears and frustrations in school, told them she loved them, and then "tossed the ball into their court"——they had the choice of learning or sitting on the sidelines. Her speech was

peppered with such similes as "Life is like a football game: you have to hit the line hard." She piled up aphorisms, partly out of habit but mostly because they helped children remember ideas.

"No one is going to hand you anything on a platter, not in this classroom. Not in this life," she said, revving up her students. "You determine what you will be, what you will make of yourselves. I am here to help you, but you must help me to do that. You can all win if you do not spend too much time trying to fail."

"In your other schools you probably started out each day saying the Pledge of Allegiance. Here we are going to start each day making a pledge to ourselves."

It was something Marva had composed herself. She asked the children to listen closely and repeat each line after her. "This day has been given to me fresh and clear…" Marva waited. Cindy belted out the words. Tracy followed, mumbling softly. Allen's voice picked up the word clear, but Gary was close-mouthed, sitting in a defiant posture with his back against the wall.

"I can either use it or throw it away." Marva continued. "I promise I shall use this day to its fullest, realizing it can never come back again." Except for Gary, the class repeated in voices that were getting stronger. "I realize this is my life to use or to throw away."

When the children finished their refrain, Marva took a sweeping step over to Allen's desk, positioned her hands solidly on each side of it, and hunched over to look the child squarely in the eye.

"Are you going to throw away your life?" she asked.

Allen crouched in his seat and giggled.

"This is not funny. What you do with your life is not a joke. Are you going to throw your life away?"

Allen sat upright with a frightened look. He rapidly shook his head no. sometimes Marva came on too forcefully. Sometimes, she knew, there was too much anger in her teaching——anger not at the children but at the desolation in their lives. She smiled, flicked her finger ticklishly under his chin, and slid over to Tracy, making the same inquiry. Sheepishly Tracy whispered no. Then Marva asked Cindy, who responded dutifully. Weaving among the desks, she approached Gary.

"Sweetheart, what are you going to do? Use your life or throw it away?"

Gary sat stonefaced, his arms across his chest.

"Of course it's your life to do with as your please," Marva reminded, "but there is a whole world out there calling you. If you throw away your life, you're just letting society have its way." She spun around to face the other children. "You know, boys and girls, there are some people who look at places like this, neighborhoods like Garfield Park, and they say 'Oh, children from there are not very smart. They aren't going to grow up to be anyone or do anything special.' If you decide to waste your lives, you are letting all those people be right. No one can tell you what you will be. Only you have the power to decide that for yourselves."

From that point Marva pushed on to Emerson and "Self Reliance." As before, she spent most of the first morning trying to convince her students that they wanted to learn. Her approach was to make the children see the link between an education and a job, a way out of the ghetto. She seldom missed a chance to draw the connection, because it was a reason they already understood.

When Tracy rummaged through her lunch sack a half hour before noon, Marva reminded, "Don't worry so much about feeding your stomach. Feed your brain first and you'll always find a way to get food for your stomach."

"Children, you are not in school for your parents, for your teachers, or for anyone else. You are here for yourselves. Your education is going to help you, not me." She swung over to the bookshelf and reached for a Bible that was nestled among Plato's Republic, The Odyssey of Homer, Little Women, Candide, Charlotte's Web, The Brothers Karamazov, and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Opening the text to the underlined passages, Marva quoted:"Proverbs, Chapter 3, verse 35 says 'Honor is the portion of wise men, but fools inherit shame.' Chapter 6, verse 6:'Go to the ant, O sluggard, study her ways and learn wisdom.' Chapter 10, verse 4:'The slack hand impoverishes, but the hand of the diligent enriches.'"

Marva paused and looked out at the children. “What do you think those proverbs mean?” She knew there would be no flurry of hands waving. Not yet. These children had never had a dialogue with a teacher before. They were not accustomed to anyone asking them what their thoughts were. “All right. Cindy, would you please tell us what they mean?”

“A lazy person will be poor and won’t have anything.” Cindy blurted out quickly, repeating one of her mother’s pet phrases.

“Very good.” Marva sat on the edge of Tracy’s desk. It was an intimate pose, suggesting that she might be about to share a secret. “The proverbs tell us that the wise man will advance in learning and will be able to take care of himself. But the fool destroys himself. A people without vision——without knowledge, without education——will perish.”

“Children, that is why you are here. You must have an education to live a good life. To survive. You may not believe what I am telling you. And you may not believe what your parents and other adults tell you. But surely you believe what the bible tells you.”

For a few moments the children sat in awed silence. Even Gary was having some difficulty trying to look cool and aloof. Marva said it was time for lunch. The pensive mood lost out to the rustling of brown paper lunch bags and voices bartering Twinkies for potato chips.

Except for Cindy, the children were not reading at the level appropriate for their age. Marva started them with the most basic lesson, going over the alphabet, pronouncing the vowel and consonant sounds. Next Marva selected two consonants and one vowel, writing them on the board and saying their sounds.

“Consonant m,” she said. “Mmm is the sound you make when something tastes delicious. Vowel sound e. In this case we have two e’s, so we put a macron over the first e to show that it says its name, and we put a slash through the second e to show it is silent. Next we have consonant t, which make the sound of a clock ticking.”

The children repeated each sound as Marva watched their pronunciation, showing them that with the sound of m their lips had

to be pressed together, with e their mouths and to be open, and with t their tongues had to hit the roofs of their mouths.

She wrote Meet me. Allen, Tracy, and Cindy each took a turn reading the words aloud. Gary refused. He was busy twisting a pencil between his fingers, as though he were winding the propeller of a model airplane. Marva didn't force him. She said, "If you pay attention and learn, you will have choices in life."

Turning her attention to the other children, she asked them all to go up to the blackboard to take dictation. Her technique was to teach reading, writing, and spelling concurrently.

Still reveling in the novelty of having her mommy for a teacher, still not certain whether she was playing school or going to school for real, Cindy raced up to the blackboard. Allen gave a shrug, as if to say "Oh, why not," and found a spot for himself. Tracy squeezed in next to Cindy. Whit a piece of chalk in her hand, Tracy began to whimper. She couldn't do it, she said.

"I love you," Marva told her. "You have no reason for crying in here. We don't shed tears, we just go ahead and try to do it. No one is going to shout at you or laugh at you for making a mistake."

Tracy said she would try. Marva decided it was time to invite Gary into the lesson. She walked over to him, placed a hand on each shoulder, and whispered, "I'm not going to leave you alone. I care about you. Let's try to do some work."

"I'm not gonna do any damn work!" he shot back.

"You are too important to be left all alone. You are the most important child in this world and people have left you alone for too long already. The Lord gave you a head to use, and if you care about yourself at all, and I know you do, then you will use it. I am not going to give up on you. I am not going to let you give up on yourself. If you sit there learning against this wall all day, you are going to end up leaning on something or someone all your life. And all that brilliance bottled up inside you will go to waste."

Marva took his arm and led him to the blackboard. He stood there, still determined to do nothing. She considered it a victory. He had not run back to his seat or, worse, out the door.

"All right, children." She began, "let's first make a capital letter M, mmm. Why a capital? Because we are beginning a sentence. Vowel sound e, then vowel e again, then consonant t." As she spoke, Marva moved from child to child, guiding their hands with her own, helping them to form the letters. "Now you have written the word Meet. Put your finger down on the board so you can leave a space for the next word. All right, finger space, then consonant m, mmm, vowel sound e, and period because it is the end of a sentence."

When she finished, Marva glanced back at Gary, who was still standing in place with his hands in his pockets. Though she preferred to win her students with affection, she was no pushover. She felt that children needed and wanted discipline. Towering beside Gary, she spoke matter-of-factly, carefully measuring her voice so he would not mistake her firmness for hostility.

"There is no one on this earth who is going to make me a poor teacher," she said, "If you do not want to participant, go to the telephone and tell your mother, 'Mother, in this school we have to learn, and Mrs. Collins says I cannot fool around, so will you please pick me up.'"

Gary considered her statement for a moment, broke off some chalk, and scribbled Meet me. He returned to his seat, deliberately bumping into other desks along the way. Marva squelched the desire to reprimand him, asking him instead if he hurt himself. Her question was the last thing Gary expected to hear from his teacher. There was even some disappointment in his voice as he muttered, "I'm okay." He sat down.

On that first afternoon the quartet of students got their first taste of literature, Aesop's Fables. Before Marva began reading aloud, she prepared her students for the story. She explained the Latin origin of the word fable and defined the term, pointing out the difference from a fairy tale.

"Aesop," she continued, "was a Greek slave who lived on Samos, which is an island that belongs to the country of Greece. Some people think Aesop was black, or at least dark-skinned. He had a heavy nose and thick lips, and he was rather homely looking. When we describe a person's facial features and the way a person looks,

we are describing physiognomy." Marva printed the word physiognomy on the board and placed the diacritical marks over the vowels.

"Now, Aesop is said to have lived about 600 years before Christ, which means he lived more than 2500 years ago." She paused. Allen was staring at the clock, his head propped up against his hand.

"We don't sit in here daydreaming our lives away." She took his hand from the side of his face and held it in her own as she continued. "Even though Aesop was a slave, he was a very wise man. The story goes that Aesop was standing with two other slaves while a master was choosing which one of them to buy. The master asked the slaves what they could do. One slave said, 'I can do anything.' The next said, 'I can do everything.' When it was Aesop's turn, he said, 'I can do nothing.' The master asked why not. Aesop replied, 'If this one can do anything, and that one can do everything, then that leaves nothing for me.'"

The children giggled. Gary grinned also, but when he caught Marva watching him, he immediately assumed a deadpan look.

"The master though Aesop was the most clever man he had met, so he bought Aesop. After a while the master set Aesop free because he was so impressed by Aesop's wit and wisdom."

Marva let the last line sink in for a moment. It was a good example of making the most of your abilities. "At the time Aesop lived, people were very disgruntled——they were very upset——with the government and the politicians. Let's try to use as many new words as we can, children. Let's expand our vocabularies. What does disgruntled mean?" It means upset. Even though the people were disgruntled with the government, they were afraid to complain. Instead of complaining, Aesop poked fun at the government through his stories, using the animals in his fables to describe the behavior of people. Now, a story that pokes fun at something is called a satire. What is it called?"

"Satire," answered Cindy.

"Very good. There is another word to describe how we make fun of something, either by our language or by the tone of our voice, and that word is sarcasm. When we see a fat man stuffing a piece of

cake in his mouth, we might say, 'He really needs that piece of cake, doesn't he? ' That is using sarcasm. We are making a sarcastic remark."

By the time Marva's students were ready to hear the fable of "The Frogs Asking for a King" they had already been exposed to a smattering of etymology, vocabulary, literary terminology, and Greek history. The fable itself was not much longer than half the printed page, but Marva's telling of it took almost twenty minutes. She stopped at words to explain their meaning, dissecting prefixes, asking for synonyms. She broke off after certain phrases to check for comprehension or add more background, roving into the knowledge of related studies.

"Who did the frogs ask to find them a king?" she asked.

"Zeus," Allen answered, looking at the floor as he spoke.

"That's right, but don't talk to the floor, talk to me. No one trusts a person who can't look you in the eye. They asked Zeus because he was the most important Greek god. The ancient Greeks believed in many gods. They had a god of the sun and a different god for the moon. A god of love and a god of war. We are going to learn all about these gods when we study Greek mythology. Zeus was the king of all the other gods. He ruled over them and he ruled over humankind. The Greeks built beautiful temples and shrines to honor Zeus. The most famous statue of Zeus was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World."

Marva continued with the fable, interrupting and staring again, asking questions and prying up responses:"Do you think it was a good idea to give the frogs a log for a king? What could that log do for them? Could it hear their complaints? Give them advice or tell them what to do? No, it could only sit there, couldn't it? Sometimes the people running our government act like logs, don't they? They don't always seem to hear what we are saying. Did you ever hear the expression like a bump on a log? What does that mean? It means a person is lazy, or indolent, doesn't it? And what does that new word indolent mean? It means lazy, doesn't it?"

Marva followed the Socratic method, in which a teacher ask a series of easily answered questions that lead the student to a logical

conclusion. To the philosopher's method she added her own brand of energy, pacing up and down the aisles, patting a head, touching an arm, rattling off questions, complimenting answers, and employing grand histrionics. The lesson did not end with the last line of the fable. It was time to strike the moral.

"What do we learn from this fable, children? What is Aesop trying to tell us?" There was silence, "Well, what about the two kinds of kings in this story? First we had a log that did what, Tracy?"

"Nothing," the girl whispered.

"Darling, you have to speak much louder than that. If you don't, I'm going to have to climb on top of a desk and stretch all the way to the ceiling so you can practice shouting up that high."

The children laughed and Marva laughed with them. "All right, all right, let's finish up this story. So we had a log that did nothing, and then we had a stork who came to be king but ended up doing what?"

"Eating the frogs," said Allen.

"One ruler was too lazy and the other was——."

"Evil," shouted Cindy.

"It didn't do the frogs any good to wish for a king, did it?"

All but Gary shook their heads no.

"Wouldn't the frogs have been better off learning how to take care of themselves? The fable shows us we have to lead ourselves instead of looking for others to lead us. If we don't think for ourselves, others will do what? They will do our thinking for us. We must each be the captain of our fate and the master of our soul."

From that day forward everything the students read or wrote would bear upon that theme, the keystone of Marva's teaching. Whether it was vocabulary, reading, mathematics, or literature, from Aeschylus to Zola, Marva's highest aim as a teacher was to endow her students with the will to learn for themselves.

By the end of the first day she knew exactly where each child was. Before she dismissed them that afternoon, she passed out sheets of math homework and phonics exercises, tailored to each child's needs. Allen was the first to catch the discrepancy.

Leaning over to look at Tracy's papers, he said, "I don't have those things. How come I don't have the same papers she does?"

Marva narrowed her eyes, furrowing her brow. "You don't look like her, do you? What makes you think you should do the same work she does?"

Making her way over to Gary, she placed three sheets of homework on his desk. He examined one of them curiously. "You got to be kidding," he said, throwing all his wallop into the word got. "You want both sides of the paper for homework?" His voice cracked in disbelief midway through the question.

"Both sides?" Marva said, affecting a throaty drawl. "When your mother gives you dinner, do you want only half a chop? When someone hires you for a job, are you going to get only half the work done?"

Gary didn't answer. After the children had filed out the door, Marva found his homework papers on the floor under his desk. This boy had to change his priorities, but she wasn't going to force him. Eventually, with lots of praise and lots of hugging, his defensiveness would melt. The only thing all children finally wanted was the chance to be accepted for themselves, to feel some self worth. Once they felt it, children became addicted to learning, and they had the desire to learn forever.

Chapter 8.

In my view the main thing is to get children reading. A child who doesn't know how to read can't do anything. But children do not learn to read by osmosis. It required work——hard boring work without any shortcuts. It is drill and more drill. Repetition and memorization. Children must learn how to use key sounds to unlock words and they must recite long lists of words that have the same a sound as in apple, the same short i sound as Indian and it, the short sound of u as in umbrella, the short sound of o as in ostrich, or the sound of short e as in Eskimo.

On the first day of school the children learned to read, write and spell Meet me. On the second day I used the same method to introduce a new initial consonant, the letter s. the children pronounced the consonant and vowel sounds in See me, and then they went to the board and wrote the words as I dictated. Having learned the ee spelling for the vowel sound e, the class went on to learn the ea also says e. I wrote e on the board, putting a macron over the e and a slash through the silent letter. And the children read and wrote See me eat.

Day three, the children progressed to reading and writing See me eat meat. Day four, I taught them the consonant h and the children read and wrote See me heat meat. On the fifth day, I reviewed everything, pretending I didn't know the sounds myself. By pretending that it was just as difficult for me to learn I was able to bait the children into reciting the sounds on their own. It was a way of informally testing them and at the same time building their confidence. Children jump at the chance to show that they know something the teacher doesn't.

"Children, as many times as I have gone over these sounds, I keep forgetting them. My old brain isn't working right. I think the sentence says see-ee me ee-ate me-ate. Is that right?"

Of course the children all started laughing. "You mean that's not right? Well, what did I do wrong?"

“You said the silent letters,” they shouted.

“I did?” I said surprised. “You mean I forgot the rule that when two vowels go walking, the first one does the——”

“Talking and says it name,” they bellowed.

By the beginning of the second week of school the children advanced from pronouncing initial consonants to consonant blends. I explained what a blend was with an easily visualized image:”When Mommy bakes a cake, she doesn’t just plop the eggs and the sugar and the flour into the bowl, does she? She stirs everything together, she blends the ingredients to make a cake. We are blending two letters, putting two letters together to make one sound.”

I started them off with th, showing them how to put their tongues between their teeth to say the sound. We practice putting our tongues between our teeth: thirty, thirteen, three, that, they, the. I wrote the word the on the board, underlining the blend th. The next step was to have the children incorporate this lesson into one they had already learned. At the board they wrote See me heat the meat.

From there we went on to the igh spelling of the vowel sound i. following the same method I had used with ee and ea, I put a macron over the i and a slash through the silent letters g and h. so that the children could identify the sound with something concrete, I had them all take a deep sigh. I put an s in front of igh and had the children say the word sigh. Next I added the final consonant t so that the word was sight.

The children learned the family of words in which igh says i: night, right, might, tight, light, flight. Building on the previous sounds, they were able to write See the night light.

I told the children that now they were on their way to reading. They would want to learn another consonant blend, fl. To show how the blend fl changes a word, I had the children say fat and flat, fight and flight. I received th once again and then had the children combine everything they had learned thus far by saying and writing See the night flight.

The third blend was br, and the children read and wrote See the bright light. After that it was back to the vowel sounds to learn the

long i as in mine and kite, and the long a, as in gale. I explained that these vowels become long when they are followed by a consonant and an e, formulating this as the i blank e rule and the a blank e rule. Putting it all together, the children read and wrote I might take a night flight.

These lessons were the kernels of reading. The children progressed through the entire alphabet in the same way. They learned all the long vowel sounds and the short vowel sounds through compounding and repetition. They learned all the beginning consonant blends and then word ending like ble, gle, tch, nk, ng, dge and tion.

They studied all the vowels and consonant rules and the exceptions to the rules. They knew, for example, that the letter c says s when it comes before e, i or y and that in all other instances it says k. they knew that at the beginning of a word the letter x says z, at the end of a word x says ks, and after the letter e it says gz or ks, as in textile and exist.

The children had the sounds and the rules coming out of the ears. They were starting to wriggle in their seats at the routine, but I kept coaxing them on. "This is not baby work. These are the tools of language. How are you going to build anything without the right tools? Every word you will read in Shakespeare or Cicero or Dante is made up of sounds like these. You have a choice. You can learn these sounds and become literate lifters of mankind, or you can be lazy leaners all your life, turning to the next person to help you get by."

The expressions "literate lifter" and "lazy leaner" usually brought out a chuckle. Children like alliteration. I often have my students practice their initial consonant sounds by reciting tongue twisters like "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" and "Betty Botter bought butter." I used the phrases "literate lifter" and "lazy leaner" so many times that the children began saying them on their own. More than once I heard Cindy and Allen teasing back and forth, asking one another, "Are you gonna be a literate lifter or a lazy leaner?"

After a month I started all four children on the second grade reader in the open course series, A Trip Through Wonderland. They read along every day as I checked their pronunciation and comprehension. Cindy, as I expected, breezed through the reader. I had worked with her from the time she was three years old, reading aloud to her, playing word games, and going over the sounds of the alphabet. She had started to read at age five, but her teacher at the Lutheran school discouraged her, making her self-conscious because none of the other kindergarteners knew how to read. Reading wasn't part of the kindergarten curriculum. When she passed into the first grade, Cindy was still so far ahead of her classmates who were learning to read with the look-say books that she just lost interest. My big job with her was to awaken her enthusiasm.

Allen also caught on quickly. He was a very bright child, but he had been ignored and allowed to daydream. The sad truth is that children who are dirty or physically unattractive are often passed over in a classroom. I had to keep after Allen about his grooming, sending him to the bathroom so wash his face and scrub under his fingernails. I brought him some clean clothes——pants and shirts my son Patrick had outgrown——and I took his own soiled things home to wash. Little by little he seemed to take more care to keep himself clean. One morning I saw him in front of the drinking fountain trying to wash the stains off his pants.

Tracy and Gary, however, were both a problem. Tracy didn't want to read. She cried and complained of headaches. I saw that the reader was too difficult for her, but when I tried to give her the easier first grade book, she wouldn't take it. She and Cindy had taken to one another immediately and become fast friends; Tracy wanted to do the same work Cindy was doing. I reasoned it might be better for her to start at the higher level and build up her self-esteem than to feel she was behind her newfound friend.

Still it was a struggle to get her to read. She kept saying, "I can't do it, I can't do it." And I kept telling her how pretty and bright she was and reminded her of the story "The Little Engine that Could." When it was her turn to read, I put my arms around her and praised her for each word she read. As soon as Tracy finished three

of four words in a row correctly, I had her stop, lest the fifth word prove too difficult. I did not want Tracy discouraged. Until she had a better opinion of herself, Tracy had to be insulated from failure.

Where Tracy become weepy, Gary would get angry. He'd take one look at the exercises or homework papers, shake his head, and shove them under his desk. I didn't make a big deal about it. I handed him the same paper along with the new one on the next day. It took about five days for Gary to see he was getting nowhere. He wasn't getting rid of the papers and he wasn't getting me upset. I wanted Gary and the other children to know I was always in control of the classroom. When Gary threw a batch of papers on the floor, I saw an opportunity to set things straight.

"I know children are always testing their limits," I said, "because when I was a child, I was always testing mine, always trying to see what I could get away with. There isn't a trick you can pull on me that I don't know. I probably did it myself when I was your age because I was full of mischief and always getting ideas in my head. My mind was always clicking, but it wasn't always to my advantage."

Stretching the facts a bit, I told them how I dumped a bushel of plums down a neighbor's well. Hiding behind a berry hedge giggling. I watched as an old woman pulled up a bucket of purple water and ran screaming into the house crying Jesus had given her a sign. The children laughed uproariously, including Gary. I described how I would occasionally turn back my parents' living room clock so I could have an hour longer to play outdoors. And I told them how I hated to go to Sunday chapel when I was in college. To avoid going I would put my coat on over my nightclothes, march out the front door of the dormitory, and sneak back inside when the housemother wasn't looking.

"But one morning the housemother caught me and I had to sit through the entire chapel service on a hot Sunday morning with my overcoat buttoned up to my neck, hiding my nightclothes. You see, I wasn't so smart after all, was I? I was the same as all children, always testing adults, always testing my teachers. The teachers who didn't know what they were doing had a hard time with me. And when a teacher would let me get by, I did just that. I remember

handing in the same paper ten times to the same teacher, who never knew the difference.

"In elementary school I used to keep steel marbles in the pocket of my dress, and when the teacher's back was turned, I would rattle them making all sorts of noise. I also kept half a dozen Mr. Goodbar candybars in my desk. I would take all the wrappers off the candy beforehand so they wouldn't make any noise, and when the teacher wasn't looking, I would pass out pieces of melted chocolate to the other children."

"Now, I am not going to let you be so bored that you have time for that kind of foolishness. You will never turn in a paper that I do not read. You will never be asked to read something that I have not also read. So don't try to fake the characters or the story. No one will try to put anything over on anyone in here. That is not what we are here for. You are here only to learn, so you can make something of you lives."

I don't expect my speech to have an instantaneous effect on Gary. I knew that for him to keep his pride intact, any initiative would have to appear to be strictly his own doing. To save face, he wouldn't allow me to think that anything I said or did had changed his mind about school. The rest of that afternoon went much as usual. I handed him papers and he tossed them on the floor. I called on him to read and he sat there silently. I said, "That's your right, Gary."

It was the same the next day. But the day after, when I called on him to read, Gary decided to give it a try. He made it through the first few words. As soon as he had trouble, he flung the book across the room.

"You have to take stumbles before you can learn to walk," I told him. "It's all right to make mistakes. I make mistakes. I'm only a poor mortal and I don't have all the answers. I don't always understand things. I'm counting on you to help me with my mistakes and I'll help you with yours. However, I do not have all the money in the world to spend on books, and you have no right to destroy the ones we have. If you do not wish to use them, then someone else will, but you have no right to ruin them for others."

He picked up the book. When he settled down, I leaned over him, rubbed his arm, and pronounced the words aloud with him as he read.

As the weeks passed, Gary found it difficult to remain hostile. No matter how many times he shouted to me, "I hate you and I'm not going to do the damn work," I always answered, "I love you all the time, even when you behave like this." I guess it took the fun out of fighting. A fair fight was one thing; taking swipes at someone who wasn't fighting back was quite another. Gradually Gary began to do the work. He still had an attitude. And he didn't get along with the other children.

On October 16, 1975 Daniel Hale Williams Westside Preparatory School accepted its fifth student, Erika McCoy. In a way it was Erika who brought Gary into line——not because of anything she did but because of what she was. She was in awful shape. A chubby girl of not quite six years, Erika seemed intent on destroy herself, and everything else in sight.

The moment of the other children saw her in the doorway, licking the mucus that was running from her nose, they broke into laughter. For Gary it was a moment of reckoning. A look at Erika gave him a quick shot of confidence. Until then he hadn't known how well off he was. If he wasn't a wiz like Cindy or even as good as Allen, he sure was ahead of this new girl. He got up from his desk at the back of the room, climbed into a seat next to Allen, and joined in the giggling and shaking of heads.

"You may know where you're going now, but that doesn't mean you forget where you came from." Marva gave the four students a hard look. Of course she understood their laughter——she was aghast herself——but she couldn't allow it. "Are some of you forgetting the problems you had?" she directed her look at Allen. "Did you like it when people in other schools laughed at you? We don't laugh at each other in here. We support each other and help each other. We are all part of the same family in this school. And people in a family help each other all the time."

As she walked into the room, Erika deliberately bumped right into a wall. She had been dressed up prettily in a velveteen jumper,

white knee socks, and patent leather Mary Jane shoes. Her mother had braided her hair with ribbons, but Erika looked completely disheveled. Her socks were hanging down around her ankles, and her feet were half out of her shoes as she broke their backs with her heels. One hair ribbon had been loosened. She was chewing on the other.

She staggered into the classroom, knocking desks and turning over chairs. She was behaving like a severely disturbed or retarded child. Clinically she was neither. Somehow she had been made to feel that she was supposed to act like that.

Erika McCoy had spent most of her nearly six years living with her grandmother in Mississippi. She had moved to Chicago over the summer to live with her mother. Ella McCoy did not know her daughter very well. As a public school teacher she thought she knew children, but she didn't have the slightest inkling of a problem when she enrolled Erika in the first grade at a nearby Lutheran school. She had chosen a parochial school because she had no faith in the Chicago school system.

Each afternoon when Mrs. McCoy picked up her daughter at the parochial school, she would faithfully ask the teacher how Erika was doing and whether there was anything she needed to help her daughter with at home. Each day, just as faithfully, the teacher told Mrs. McCoy, "No, everything is fine." then came the phone call. The teacher was requesting a conference to discuss "Erika's problem."

Mrs. McCoy was beside herself. It was only three weeks into the semester. What could be wrong? She drove to the school that evening. The teacher said, "Erika cannot read and she will probably never learn to read. We are taking her out of first grade and putting her into a special class."

Mrs. McCoy didn't hear another word. Her daughter was only five and a half years old and already these people were writing her off. Dazed, Mrs. McCoy went home to work with Erika. Erika shook her head, "No, I can't do that. My teacher said I can't learn how to do that." No matter how much Mrs. McCoy tried to coax her daughter, bribing her with ice cream, candy, and a new toy, Erika

would only repeat. “Oh no, Mommy, my teacher said I can’t do that. I can’t learn that.”

Mrs. McCoy spent three sleepless nights worrying about her daughter. On Sunday evening she happened to watch a local television program on alternative schools. Part of the show dealt with the school Marva was running in a basement classroom at Daniel Hale Williams University. Mrs. Mccoy looked up Marva’s phone number and called. Marva told her to bring Erica to the school.

The following morning Marva settled Erika at a desk and told her, “Don’t you worry about a thing. You are a very smart girl. You will soon be doing what everyone else in here does. Right now they have a little head start because they have been here longer. I will work with you and teach you. Soon you will be reading and adding and subtracting numbers, too.”

The class began with arithmetic.

“What is arithmetic? It is a Greek word meaning what?” Marva asked.

“skilled in numbers,” came a chorus of four voices. Gary was joining in for the first time, and his participation certainly did not go unnoticed.

“My goodness, Gary, we’ve come a long way. You see how well you do when you try?” Marva smiled and Gary too looked pleased with himself.

Marva wrote 2+3 = 5 on the board.

“Which number is the sum, children?”

“Five,” they answered.

“And two and three are called what, Allen?”

“Addends,” he said.

“Tres bien.” Marva printed addends on the board and placed the diacritical marks over the vowels. Phonics was incorporated into everything from math to science.

“An addend is a number that is added to another number. You must remember the words sum and addend because they are used on all the standardized tests. Those words trip up many students. If the question was ‘Find the sum of the addends two and three,’ what would your answer be?”

"Five," they responded.

"Very good." Marva handed out math worksheets.

"Very good." Marva handed out match worksheets.

The children were working at different levels in math. Cindy was doing two-digit addition, learning to carry tens. Tracy was still having a difficult time with simple addition. Gary and Allen were both on multiplication. Marva moved from child to child, teaching each one individually.

Tracy was drawing sticks beside each problem, counting up the sticks to find the answer.

"You are not going to count sticks or blocks or circles or rabbits in here," Marva said, bending over Tracy's desk. "Look, sweetheart, six and seven cannot possibly make eight. Eight is only one more than seven. You want to add six to seven. Count out loud with me: eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen. Six and seven make thirteen."

Tracy began erasing her wrong answer.

"No, darling. Remember, we draw a circle around the error and put the correct answer above it. We proofread mistakes, we don't erase them. When you erase a mistake from the paper, you erase it from your mind, too, and you will make the same mistake over again."

Marva looked up and saw Erika had taken off her socks and was chewing on them instead of the hair ribbon.

"That's not how the brightest child in the world behaves," Marva said, taking the socks out of Erika's mouth. Handing her a pencil, Marva asked Erika if she could print her name at the top of the math paper. Erika shook her head and said she couldn't. "Don't say 'I can't,'" Marva told her. "Say, 'I'll try.' If you say, 'I'll try.' Then we'll get it done together." Erika grabbed the paper, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it on the floor.

"I love you and I know you can do it," Marva said, taking out a fresh sheet.

"No!" Erika shouted, punching holes through the paper with her pencil.

At lunch Erika took the cap off her thermos and let the juice dribble all over her dress. She took apart her sandwich, licking the mayonnaise from the bread and getting it all over her face. The other children giggled and whispered among themselves.

"She's crazy," Gary said.

"I don't want to hear any name-calling." Marva told him. "God made us all special. If you don't like someone, then you write a letter to the Lord and say, 'Lord, you goofed on so-and-so.'"

Suddenly Erika looked straight at the group, a dab of mayonnaise smeared on the tip of her nose. "My teacher said I can't read."

"If you don't forget what that teacher told you. I'm going to get terribly angry." Marva shot back. Before her lay weeks of deprogramming, telling Erika over and over, "You are not a bad girl, you are not a stupid child." It wasn't going to be easy for either of them.

I estimated it would take Erika a month, about the same time it took most children to get started reading. Usually it took a month for the lessons on sounds to jell and for students to become comfortable expressing their thoughts in class. Erika was the most difficult child I had ever encountered. I couldn't seem to reach her. I had always been sure of my ability to move children, but my approach wasn't working with Erika. All the affection, the praise, and the encouragement seemed to hit deaf ears. By Christmas vacation, nearly two months after she had come to the school, Erika was no different than on the first day she arrived.

In the middle of a lesson she would get out of her seat, sit down on the floor, and scoot around the room on her behind. Often I had to told her on my lap to keep her still while the other children read aloud. Erika rubbed against the board, covering her backside with chalk dust. If she wasn't stuffing socks into her mouth, then she was biting a pencil. She wrote all over her reader with crayola, and when I gave the children their first novel, Little Women, Erika chewed the edges of the pages. I told her to stop. She snapped, "I can if I want!" she tossed her head defiantly.

Mrs. McCoy told me her daughter was just as diabolical out of school. While riding in the car Erika would grab the steering wheel or throw a sweater over her mother's head. She would tear up people's houses wherever she went visiting. One time she replaced the assorted chocolates in a box of candy with rocks, to the dismay of an elderly neighbor woman. Mrs. McCoy had no control over her daughter and absolutely no idea how to handle her. Neither did I.

I wasn't upset with Erika but with myself for not being able to get through to her. Several evenings I burst into tears just thinking about that child. Clarence tried to console me, telling me to forget about it, but I couldn't forget. I was not going to let any child fall victim to a label of failure.

A few days after we returned from the Christmas holidays, Erika ran out of the classroom, up the stairs, and out of the building. I chased after her, grabbing her arms tightly. Holding her close, I said that was not the way to behave; children couldn't run out of school any time they wanted to. She pushed away from me and shouted, "I can do what I want! My mommy lets me. I say, 'Please, please.' And she lets me do what I want."

I realized then how blind I had been. I should have recognized the problem before. All the signs had been there, laid out before me in a pattern like the numbered drawings in a coloring book. I recalled that Mrs. McCoy had brought a pot of spaghetti for the whole class on Erika's second day in school. I recalled hearing the she took Erika to the movies or to an amusement park on weekday afternoons. No wonder endearments and praise hadn't worked. The child was used to hearing them all the time, indiscriminately, indulgently. In that moment I saw that Erika had been begging not only for attention but for discipline.

I took her by the hand, led her back inside the classroom, and sat her down at her desk. I distributed reading comprehension worksheets mimeographed from old editions of the California Achievement Tests. I frequently gave my students the old tests for practices, even at Delano. I didn't put much stock in standardized tests myself, but as long as so many other educators did, my students would probably have to take these tests at one time or

another, when they transferred out of my school or went on to high school. Thus it was important for them to know how to take tests.

"I don't need any tests to show me how much you know. I see it every day by what you do in here. But we learn how to take tests because we live in a world that often judges us by how we perform on tests."

I was guiding the children through the first few examples when I heard paper tearing. Erika was ripping her sheet into long shreds.

"I saw a man yesterday giving a million dollars to anyone who could tear up paper. Employers pay a lot of money for someone to do that, don't they? You'll get the best job in the world knowing how to tear paper, won't you?" The other children shook their heads no. I took away the paper and gave Erika a new one. "I want you to circle the synonyms on this paper, right now."

"I won't!" she screamed.

I saw a lot of myself in Erika, the same strong will and determination. I had to show her that I was more determined than she. The four other children had forgotten about their own work and were watching. If I didn't do something fast, I was going to lose all of them. I whirled around, grabbing the first object that came to hand, an extension pipe from a vacuum cleaner left by the maintenance crew. Clutching the pipe in my hand, I stood over Erika and stared her dead in the eye.

"I'm going to kill you today if you don't finish your paper," I shouted. No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I was stunned at having spoken them. Still dazed by my rage, I heard one of the children gasp. They were all listening with large-eyed disbelief. There was a loud throbbing deep in my own throat and my whole body was quivering.

I didn't know what had come over me. I could never hit a child. Never. I had never in my life threatened a child. I wondered whether this desperation was for Erika or for myself. I wished I could drop the pipe to the floor and go on with the lesson as if nothing had happened. But once I had begun this thing, I had to see it through. The big question was whether the child would call my bluff.

Holding back the quaver in my voice, I told her, "Everyone says you are crazy. I don't believe that. But if you don't finish that paper, then I'll know you're crazy. You might as well be dead if you are going to go through life the way you are."

Erika's eyes were riveted on the paper. Her hands were planted firmly on it, palms flat and fingers pressed together. Her right hand jerked slightly, tipping the pencil off the desk. She leaned over, picked it up, and held it pinched between her thumb and forefinger. She hastily circled the word throw as a synonym for pitch. Moving on to the second question, she matched silly with foolish.

I wanted to laugh. Erika had been listening all along! All the time she had been acting up, all the time she had been tearing her papers and chewing her books, seeming not to pay attention, she had been listening and learning. I stood there until she finished the page. After the last question, Erika tilted her round face upward. "Am I in first grade or was I put back?"

I gaped at her. She understood perfectly about the label that had been put on her. I said that of course she was in first grade. "We don't ever go backwards in here. What is past is past. We only move forward."

Reassured, she handed me her paper, then pulled the ribbon from her pigtail and chewed on it. I decided to take care of one problem at a time.

Erika joined the other children in the reading group. Over the next few days she seemed to become a different child. Of course her change had really not come about suddenly. All those weeks Erika had probably been working things out in her own head, taking note of herself and the other students. And she had been sizing me up, testing my attitude, my trustworthiness, and my acceptance of her. It wasn't my threat that made her alter her behavior for the long run. What sustained the change in Erika was her own decision to settle down, a decision contingent on whether I came through for her. I did my best.

After a while Erika's seeming lack of interest was replaced by active curiosity, her lethargy turned into ambition, and her obstreperousness gave way to a measure of self-control. The

potential had always been there. It exists in all children. The challenge for a teacher is to bring the potential out. There is no such thing as the way to reach a student. Any way is the way as long as it works for the individual child.

Some children, like Allen and Tracy, respond easily to affection and warmth. Others, like Gary, hide their fears and frustrations behind a wall of defensiveness; they have something to prove to themselves and everyone else. Erika seemed convinced that there was something wrong with her, that no one would accept her. Through her actions she issued a challenge:"Are you going to believe in me and accept me no matter what I do?"

I discovered that Erika was a pleaser. She did what people expected her to do; she became what they expected her to become. According to her mother, a previous teacher had told Erika that she was dumb, and that was exactly what Erika tried to be. She didn't try to prove her teacher wrong. I laid before her a different set of expectations. And Erika responded. Children rise to the level their teachers set, as numerous studies have shown.

Erika still had a thirst for attention, but she sought it now through precocity. Erika became a zealous student, sometimes overly zealous. Every time I asked a question, her hand would shoot up, waving frantically. "Me, Mrs. Collins, call on me, please!" When I had my students memorize a poem a week, Erika memorized three or four. She would turn in a paper and then ask to do it over again because it wasn't neat enough.

Once she began reading and saw what fun it was, there was no stopping her. She became addicted to books. If she wasn't reading one of the Judy Blume books or one from the Laura Ingalls Wilder series, then she was trying out The Fables of La Fontaine or The Song of Roland. One day, as I want around the class asking each child what new bit of knowledge he or she had learned that day, Erika said, "I'm like Socrates. The only thing I know is how much I don't know. I'm learning something new every day." As much as I praised her, though, I still had to keep after her.

Erika pulled up academically first. Socially she dragged behind. She didn't know how to talk to the other children, how to mingle,

and her frantic enthusiasm put them off almost as much as her previous antics had done. It didn't matter to Erika. She knew I was determined to teach her and prove she wasn't stupid. For the time being, that was enough.

Chapter 9

By January 1976, a little more than four months after the school started, the size of my class had almost tripled as a result of word of mouth and publicity from the television news feature and from an article in The Chicago Defender, a black-owned newspaper. Teaching became more complicated. I was running a one-room schoolhouse. In contrast to my teaching at Delano, where all the students had been in the same grade and around the same age, I now had boys and girls of all ages and abilities with an odd assortment of problems.

The new children were crammed together in the front half of the room. Theodore was the oldest, a beefy twelve year old who looked like the tackle on a football team. I had one year to build up his third grade reading level and get him ready to pass the high school entry exams. Next to him George Beecher slumped nonchalantly in his seat most of the time. A round-faced eleven year old, he walked with a waddle and could barely write his name. He could not add four plus one or read "bat" or "cat," even though his previous teachers at a Catholic school had promoted him to sixth grade with a report of "making fair progress." His five years in parochial school had been a waste. He gave the teacher no trouble and they left him alone. For five years he sat in the back of the room and listened to other students perform. I had seen that pattern before. Fat children, quiet children, dirty children, and children with unappealing or perhaps scarred features were hidden away in the back of a classroom and forgotten.

Frail six-year-old Janette Moore wouldn't talk. She sat and stared. No feeling. No emotion. Just a blank look. Her mother told me the child had been molested. I didn't talk about the incident with Janette. It took me four months to get her to smile when she was tickled.

Theodore, George, and Janette were representative of the thirteen new students. Not one was reading at the level appropriate

for his or her age. Some had been labeled "unteachable" or "learning disabled" by previous teachers and psychologists and had been placed in or recommended for special learning programs. These children arrived at the school with satchels full of official memoranda documenting their behavior disorders and their emotional, psychological, or psychosocial problems. They were a band of misfits and discards, and nobody else seemed to want them. I needed students. I felt I could help them.

Most of their parents knew very little about me or the school. I don't think they were coming to me because of the curriculum or educational philosophy of the school. They came because we had a open door and empty desks. I was just one more alternative to be tried, probably not much different from the ones they had tried before or the ones they would have to try later, when I too gave up on their children.

Some of the parents came to me in a more desperate mood. For them our school was a last resort. Their children had been turned out of school, in some cases illegally, and they had nowhere else to go. I had the feeling that some of these parents were less concerned with that I could do for their children than with finding a place to dump their problems.

The first thing I did was toss aside all the reports and cumulative records. My experience had shown me that those reports were wrong more often than they were right. I had seen too many children with their personalities ink-blotted, their IQs probed, and their every move analyzed——children written off as losers.

One of the things I hated most about the public schools was how quickly teachers "blue-slipped" children for psychological referral. Every time they came across a child who was too hard to deal with, out came the blue slip, a convenient excuse. The private and parochial schools were just as quick to label a child. Erika McCoy was one example, one of many who came to our school. One mother told me her son's Catholic school principal recommended that the boy transfer to the Beacon School for emotionally disturbed and learning-disabled children. A teacher at Beacon told her. "You son doesn't belong here. He is not emotionally disturbed. When a

child misbehaves in the Catholic schools, they are quick to ascribe it to mental problems."

Too often teachers, school psychologists, and social workers have preconceived notions about children and pigeonhole them accordingly. Children with divorced parents run a high risk of being stereotyped, as do children from wealthy families, or those with working mothers, and black children living in neighborhoods like Garfield Park. Tell some people where these children live, and right away they assume that the children are abused or neglected, that they come to school hungry, have no clothes, and have never lived with a father. Some teachers assume that these children can never learn anything.

Over the years I've heard all the arguments from people in and out of education. What good is it to teach a ghetto child Shakespeare? Why bother teaching literature and philosophy? Just give them some vocational training, if they can handle that much.

We live in a label-conscious society where people are forever trying to categorize and classify each other. We tend to overuse terms like "learning disability," "developmental disabilities," "behavior disorder," and "hyperactive," bandying them about until they are stretched beyond validity. A child who fidgets in his seat isn't necessarily hyperactive. Maybe that child is bored. Maybe that child doesn't know how to do the work and is afraid to ask for help. Or maybe that child is just active. One boy's kindergarten teacher claimed he was hyperactive because he wouldn't put his head down during morning rest period. The child's mother, a pediatric nurse, argued that her son had twelve hours of sleep every night and simply wasn't tired during the day. Another teacher advised a mother not to feed her seven-year-old son sugar-coated breakfast cereal because the boy showed signs of hyperactive. When the mother asked what the symptoms were——did her son have any trouble learning or was he a behavior problem?——the teacher replied no, the child was very bright but he had too much energy and she couldn't keep up with him.

Often a problem in the classroom lies not with the child but in the relationship between the child and the teacher. A teacher's

assessment of a child is necessarily based on that teacher's life experience. That means certain children trigger a positive or negative reaction because of the teacher's past, a reaction having little to do with the children's abilities or personalities. For example, a child might remind a teacher of someone, perhaps a sibling or a classmate he or she didn't get along with.

Teachers are, after all, people, and there are times when they respond to situations not as teachers but as unhappy people. Occasionally a child gets stuck with a label because the teacher overreacts in frustration over behavior that might be nothing more than normal childish antics. Sometimes a teacher is just angry with a child and wants to retaliate. And all too frequently a teacher's personality, attitudes, and preferences color his or her response to a child.

A teacher can make or break a child, favor or stigmatize him. Just as there are teachers who are inspiring, who can spark interest and turn students on to learning, there are teachers who can turn a student off, not only to school but to himself. Not that it is done consciously. But a teacher has to be sensitive to all things at all times. Even such offhand remarks as "Your older brother was a brilliant student" or "You're the biggest one in class so you stand in the back row for the assembly problem" can alienate a child.

I was aware of these issues as an educator and as a parent. Around the time my thirteen new students enrolled in the school, my son Patrick, who was ten, was having difficulty with one of the teachers at his new private school. For some reason Patrick's teacher didn't like him. She would display every child's paper but his. She kept him inside during recess taking tests, and she criticized him in front of the others, turning him into the class dummy. Eventually the other children supported the teacher's characterization, poking fun at Patty in the gym or in the lunchroom.

I knew Patrick could do the work. I sat with him at night as he read Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" aloud without any trouble. I couldn't understand why that teacher was riding the boy so hard. Clarence and I both wanted to pull Patty out of the school, but Patty kept insisting he didn't want to be a quitter and he didn't want to be

pampered like a sissy. So I mistakenly gave in and let him stay, hoping the situation would ease itself and the teacher would have a change of heart. Meanwhile Patty began stuttering, and I'd have to say, "Take your time, baby, Mommy's here."

Several nights I got out of bed and fund Patty sleeping fitfully, gnashing his teeth and mumbling, "Oh no, I can do it." I felt angry and guilty and desperate——the same feelings many of my students' parents had experienced. And like those other parents, I didn't know what to do. Since Patty was so determined to stick it out at that school, at least until the end of the year, how could I undercut his resolve? And if I did take him out, I didn't know where I would put him. Over the years I had pretty well exhausted the list of private schools in the city, and I thought the worst thing I could do would be to put him in school with me. He would surely feel like a defeated baby running back to his mother.

All I could do was comfort him and reassure him, trying to rebuild his shattered confidence each day. The whole family gave him all their love and encouragement and support. I hated Patty's teacher, more than I had ever hated anyone before. I wondered, if they are doing that to my child, how many others are suffering the same or worse?

For students the vast pool of teachers is like an educational lottery. A child is lucky to draw a good teacher and get off to a winning start, but there is no guarantee that another teacher the next year will keep the child on track.

My attitude toward teachers' evaluation——of my own children and those in my class——kept me from taking anybody else's word for what a child was or was not. I didn't have faith in aptitude tests either. Some children become confused and disoriented and can't perform when taking those tests. Patrick was one of them. Sometimes a child, worried about doing well and living up to a parent's expectations (set perhaps by an older brother or sister), freezes during a test.

And I didn't believe psychological tests were any more conclusive, especially since the results often depended on interpretation. For example, one of my students, a seven-year-old

girl, had undergone a "mental status examination." Asked to draw a picture of her own choice, she drew a park scene——a yellow sun, two blue clouds, a green lawn, a big brown and green tree, and three flowers surrounding a figure of a child throwing something in a garbage can. According to the psychiatrist's evaluation, the "theme of the garbage can indicated perhaps preoccupation with being abandoned, thrown away." Yet another psychologist said the drawing could indicate a preoccupation with neatness and cleanliness. Who was the parent to believe?

Because of all the problems my son Patrick was having with his teacher, the school psychologist put him through a battery of tests, which included a human figure drawing. Because he had drawn the feet first, the psychologist concluded Patrick had a problem. However, I thought that was perfectly natural since Patty has big feet, his brother Eric has big feet, and I have big feet.

Knowing all the things that can contaminate an expert's judgment of a child, I refused to view any child as unteachable. I didn't know whether my new students had clinical dysfunctions. Maybe some did. But I was never going to teach them as though they did. I was not going to narrow my expectations. I was convinced that somehow, and in some way. I would be able to reach each child.

Like so many other children I had taught over the years, my thirteen new students all seemed to have the same feelings of worthlessness and insecurity. Whatever their individual problems, the one thing they all had in common was too much failure. I knew I would have to implant new success messages. I had to condition them to think positively, as I had done with all of my previous students.

There was one big difference with the entry of these new children. Mine was not the only voice of encouragement; it was now backed by a chorus of support from my five original students. By now they were old hands at Emerson. They knew all the proverbs and quotations about believing in oneself. And they were rooting for the newcomers.

Before, I had been the only one saying "I won't let you fail." Now it was "We are not going to let you fail. We are going to right there to help you along."

Turning to Cindy and Tracy and Erika and Gary and Allen, I asked, "There was a time in here when all of you did not what?"

"Did not know," they answered.

"And now you must do what? You must help whom?"

"Another child," they shouted.

Learning was to be a group effort. Everyone in the school was part of the team, and like any team, the school would only work if everyone pulled together. This was the first time I was dealing with so many different age groups and achievement levels. Without the all-for-one-and-one-for-all spirit, there was no way to get a twelve year old to feel good about sitting in the same room with children five, six, and seven years old.

More important, each child needed to feel loved and wanted. Each child needed the sense of belonging. Most were still suffering the stigma of being the outcasts and oddballs in their previous school. Our class had to be a support group, urging one another along and delighting in each other's small accomplishments, much the way a group of Weight Watchers rallies around a new dieter or an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting takes a new member under wing. I didn't want any of the children to feel that they were on their own. Therefore, I tried to turn the age discrepancies into an advantage, creating a climate where students would tutor and help one another.

Chapter 10.

By the end of February 1976, one month after they had entered the school, all thirteen of the new students were reading. Some were reading better than others of course, but all of them had a hold on the roots of phonics. I thought I would die when I had to go back to the very beginning all over again and teach the new children that sounds make up words and words stand for thoughts. But I did it, as I would continue to do with each new child, starting right in with the drills, the chanting, and the sing-song recitation of the vowel and consonant sounds. I was tired of the routine, but I never let it show. A good teacher has to be a ham. I always tried to appear as fresh and energetic as if I were teaching the exercises for the first time.

"What I do here is no miracle," I would tell my students. "It's simply hard work. My feet are killing me. My throat hurts from talking, and when you are asleep at night, I am up preparing your lessons."

Each child at the school got the work he or she needed. That was the only way I could effectively teach such an assortment of students. I would say, "We don't all wear the same size shoe, do we? When we go to the doctor, we don't all get the same kind of medicine, do we?" If a child was having difficulty with homonyms such as to and too, the appropriate worksheet would be on the desk the next morning. If a child was having difficulty adding dollars and cents or working out story problems, there were other worksheets. None of the individualized lessons could be prepared in advance because I never knew what specific need or weakness would surface each day.

The children's reading ability evolved from the embryo of phonics. Once children master the sounds and learn how to syllabicate, they progress rapidly. A first grade child who is taught intensive phonics can read four-syllable words within four or five months. Studies show that with phonics a first-grader can have a reading vocabulary of 24,000 words by the end of the year. A child

learning the look-say method has a reading vocabulary of 1,500 words at the end of the fourth grade. The look-say vocabularly does not include such common words as boil, brain, copy, pain, pity, pray, pride, puff, root, spare, stir, sum, tax, thirty, twelve, vote. With phonics a first-grader can read those words after a few weeks. Phonics enables a child to decipher words and so allows better reading comprehension. When a child understands the relationship between a series of spoken sounds and the printed word, the child will read for meaning. Comprehension is hampered with the look-say method because a child has to guess at words. Busy trying to identify each word from memory, the child can't concentrate on what a sentence means. With look-say there is a tendency to displace words and meanings. A child who has to rely on memory and context clues to recognize whole words is prone to misread words and make word substitutions. A study of misreading errors made by high school students——including students who had passed college entrance aptitude tests——showed that instead of reading Solomon, the students read salami. They misread delicacy as delinquency, hurricane as hammer, groceryman as clergyman, inert as inherent, and imbecility as implicitly. In total the study recorded approximately 100,000 similar misreading errors made by students ranging from first grade to college.

As soon as my students learned the sounds of words, they also learned homonyms, synonyms, antonyms, and spelling. The moment they were introduced to a vowel sound, the children put it to work, using the spelling for that vowel to form words. For example, using the spellings for the a and e sounds, they completed such words as _____t (a number), _____t (we do this with food), h_____ (we feed this to horses), f_____t (we walk on these), th_____ (a plural pronoun), pl_____n (not fancy), and str_____t(a line that is not crooked).

Later the children progressed to transcribing words from the phonetic spelling. What might have looked like a foreign language to some students was perfectly clear to my brood. They knew that is annoy, is amuse, is cake, is fright, is frequent, is eraser, is music, and is explosion. I kept their reading and writing skills working in

tandem. My students were never going to think by the mile and write by the inch.

Critics of the phonics method claim it can't teach children to read well because there are too many irregular sounds and spellings in the English language. The German schwa sound, for instance, has some thirty different spellings, including: a in tidal, e in sicken, I in charity, o in come, u in typhus, ion in vacation, le in sickle, m in prism.

I dealt with the irregularities by spotlighting representative words. When I taught a sound, I brought in all the spelling patterns for that sound. To teach the sound of z, I used words like music, zebra, has, and treasure. The three f spellings, as in fight, phone, and cough, were taught together. Ck and ch words were taught together when they both made the hard k sound as in tack and ache. Words like sugar, tuition, permission, special and ocean were taught along with sh words like ship, shall, and shelf and words having the French ch sound, as in challis and charlatan. The soft ch sound, as in chime or cheese was taught separately.

In order for the children to practice distinguishing the sounds, I composed chanteys that they recited aloud in cadence, clapping twice at the end of each refrain:

Change and chord, change and chord
Change says chuh and chord says ck.
Chin and chagrin, chin and chagrin.
Chin says chuh and chagrin says sh.
Go and edge, go and edge
The vowel signal e changes go to j.
Beg and beige, gap and revenge.
Cap and rice, or can and nice
The vowel signal e changes c to s.
Sweater and pleasure, sweater and pleasure
The vowel ea now says eh.
Sit and site, sit and site
The vowel signal e hits the vowel before it
And makes it says its name, and makes it say its name.
Bread and knead, bread and knead

Bread says eh and knead says e.

Accumulate and quotient, accumulate and quotient

Accumulate says q and quotient says kw.

There are 180 rules for consonant and vowel sounds. We were constantly repeating drills and reviewing phonics. And we continued over the years, even when the children had progressed to reading things like The Brothers Karamazov. The phonics review allowed their spelling to keep pace with their reading.

I started off Theodore and George, my oldest students, in the sixth grade reader. The only way to motivate children is to make them stretch. Both these boys belonged in the third or fourth grade books, but there would have been no incentive for them to learn if they felt they were doing the same work as the younger children.

Cindy, Erika, Allen, and Gary pushed on to the third grade book by the middle of the year. So did Tracy. I had worked with her alone, tutoring her before and after school until I brought her up to where Cindy was. In class I continued to guard her reading, stopping her after a few sentences so she wouldn't make a mistake. Months went by with Tracy experiencing these small, controlled spurts of success. One day when I cut short her turn, she looked up at me doe-eyed and asked, "Please, Mrs. Collins, can I try more? Can I read one more sentence?" I was thrilled. She wasn't merely trying to please me. She had finally reached the point where she felt competent. Of course I let her go on reading aloud. When she came to the end of the paragraph, the rest of the class, led by Cindy and Allen, burst into applause. The support of her classmates sealed Tracy's confidence. From that day on she was out of her shell.

Meanwhile Janette and some of the other newcomers were working with the second grade book. As soon as they were able to read the material, I skipped them on to the more advanced reader. As a motivating technique I always told the children the grade level of the book they were reading. If they were reading well, I'd say they were not going to finish the book they were on, they were going to move ahead to the third, fourth, or fifth grade book. Little children always want to be like the big children. The incentive for the older children was to read at or above their grade level so they could

be role models for their younger classmates to look up to. Somehow there was no competitive atmosphere.

By loving and touching and talking to each child, I tried to create an atmosphere of mutual caring. The children cheered one another when they recited or read aloud, and occasionally they even applauded me. And when a younger child moved up to a higher level, the older students offered congratulations. They were proud of their classmate's accomplishment. Allen, for example, proved to be such an excellent reader that by May I felt he could handle the sixth grade reader. Theodore and George took him under wing like big brothers.

We all shared in each other's success. No one laughed at or called attention to another child's shortcomings. And anyone who dared to try was immediately reminded of Coleridge's line from The Ancient Mariner:"All things both great and small…He made and loveth all." If a student tried to score points by tattling on a classmate, I immediately said, "If God had meant for you to see for me, he would have stuck our heads together."

Every two weeks the children had to report on a book they read outside class. Marva was accumulating a stockpile of books, some donated and some purchased at charity book fairs or used bookstores. The inventory was a literary mulligan stew, classical authors mixed in with writers of popular children's fiction. E.M.Forster, Somerset Maugham, and William Faulkner shared the shelves with Judy Blume, Roald Dahl, and Shel Silverstein.

On the second and fourth Friday of the month Marva chose a book for each child, handing out copies of The Jungle, Pride and Prejudice, O'Henry's Tales, Mysterious Island, Spring Is Here, Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, Lord of the Flies, 1984, The Fall of the House of Usher, and Great Expectations, among others. Marva seemed to dispense the books arbitrarily. However, her policy was the older a child, the more difficult the book, even if the child's reading level was not quite high enough. Children used to failure needed goals if they were going to succeed. That was her rationale for giving Theodore, her twelve year old with the third grade reading ability, one of the thickest books on the shelf, Moby Dick.

"Hey, Mrs. Collins, I got the wrong book."

"No, sweetheart, I gave you the right book, Moby Dick."

"But it's got so many pages and so many words on a page. It's got no pictures. This is a book for big kids."

"I think you're big enough."

"Naw, in the old school I always got easy books."

"Well, in this school we don't give young men like you easy books. We don't expect you to do the same work the little children do. Give this book a try. You don't have to understand everything in it, but see what you can do. It's made up of words and words are made up of what?"

"Sounds," Theodore grinned.

"That's right. And as long as you remember your sounds and know how to use dictionary, you'll do fine."

At the end of the day Theodore left the school clasping the copy of Moby Dick so that everyone could see the title and the thickness. Marva wanted him to show it off. As far as she was concerned, all he had to do at the end of the two weeks was tell her the book was about a big fish. As it turned out, he told her Moby Dick was a big, white, man-eating whale.

It was through Operation Read, the forty-five minutes of free reading right after lunch, that Marva stimulated her students' interest in books, exposing them to a vast range of stories, topics, and authors. Each child read a chapter or two from a book or a short story or some poetry or a masterplot summary from Digests of World Literature. It was the only silent reading the children did in class. After the reading there was a period in which the children told about their individual reading.

They read and Marva read along, encouraging them to try new authors. She stocked her shelves with the very best stories possible, such as Ovid's Metamorphoses ("Don't get hung up on the long word; the book is nothing but the Greek myths all over again," she reassured the children), the Satyricon, Guy de Maupassant's stories, Greek drama, Candide, and Crime and Punishment. Marva knew the children would return to these books years later like lifelong friends.

After the quiet reading time, Marva would take the first turn at telling what she read. She would dramatize the stories, sometimes putting in things that weren't there to make the telling more vivid. Pacing across the front of the room, she explained how Raskolnikov carefully counted the number of steps from his house to the pawnbroker's apartment as he prepared for his crime.

"Crime and Punishment is a psychological novel," she said. "Psychology, which is the study of why people think and behave the way they do, comes from the Greek word psyche, meaning the human soul or mind. Now this is a story of guilt. No one knows for sure that Raskolnikov murdered the old woman and her sister, but he thinks they know, so he gives himself away. If you do something wrong, your guilty conscience makes you think everybody knows about it. Raskolnikov is poor and unhappy, and he doesn't have many friends. Children, is that a good excuse for getting bad thoughts in his head and committing murder?"

Another time she dramatized the sufferings of Candide, telling how he was expelled from the Baron's castle, captured and tortured by the Bulgarlans, shipwrecked, caught in an earthquake, and flogged——all within the first few chapters. She told her students about The Happy Prince by Oscar Wilde, pointing up the lesson that a generous heart is rewarded. By way of contrast, she outlined the gloomier view taken In Lord of the Flies.

"You see what happens when you don't' care about your fellow man. All children like to be free of restrictions. You all think it would be ideal not to have adults around to tell you what to do. But we need restrictions; we all need order and discipline. Without them we would all be destroyed. Society would be chaos."

When Marva finished summarizing what she had read, some child would invariably say, "Oh, can I read that next?" And then a classmate would ask, "Can I have it after you?"

Her synopses were not confined to literature. Sometimes she told the children the stories behind operas such as La Boheme or The Marriage of Figaro or narrated hallets such as Giselle, The Nutcracker, and Petrouchka. The making of educated young men and women, she believed, required exposure to the full breadth of

culture. How else would children from an inner-city ghetto learn about opera or ballet?

Then Marva went from child to child, asking what he or she had read that day. It was during one of these oral periods after Operation Read that George Beecher, the overweight and sullen eleven year old, finally opened up. George had been ignored for so long in his previous school that he found it hard to break the habit of not participating in discussions. Marva encouraged him but didn't' push. When children were ready to come around, they would. She asked him what he had read, and suddenly he rose to the occasion.

"I read part of The Pearl by John Steinbeck," he mumbled. The children had to state the title and the author before they began explaining anything else.

"Speak up, darling." Marva told him. "Don't let someone else steal your thunder or you'll always be just a little raincloud."

"This guy Kino." He continued. "found the biggest and greatest pearl in the world. He was poor, and then he found the pearl and everyone wanted to be his friend. The doctor wouldn't take care of his sick baby before, but now he came to take care of it and be Kino's friend."

"Why wouldn't the doctor take care of the baby?" The question came from a classmate.

"'Cause the doctor only wanted to take care of rich people." George said, pleased by the other student's interest and confident of his answer. "Rich people had money and the poor people only had fish to give him."

"Yeah, I know a lady who got sick and the doctor didn't want to take care of her 'cause she was on public aid," chimed to Theodore.

"Everyone's always pushing poor people around," said Allen.

"When you're poor, the landlord turned off the heat and he don't care if you freeze," added Gary.

"Let's not cry about what's wrong with this world." Marva told them. "Complaining isn't going to change things. Learn all you can so you will become the doctors, the lawyers, the politicians, and the thinkers. Then you can change things yourself."

“Aw, politicians don’t change things,” said Cindy. “They have those picnics every year in the park and pass out free hotdogs, but they don’t do a thing.”

“Then you will have to be the ones ot come back to neighborhoods like Garfield Park and rebuild them,” answered Marva. “Now, George, go on with your story.”

“Well, first everyone acted like they was Kino’s friends, but is was fake ‘cause they really wanted to get that pearl. And then someone went sneaking around Kino’s house at night looking for the pearl and Kino had to fight him off and Kino’s wife started to think the pearl was bad.”

“Sweetheart, what do you think Steinbeck is telling us in this book?” Marva asked him.

“That people always want money and want to get the rich things someone else got.”

“Very, very good. And what else is Steinbeck saying? He’s showing us that having valuable things doesn’t necessarily make us happy.”

“Nope. When you got something good, it can turn out bad. It’s like you always tell us, Mrs. Collins, life’s not perfect.”

George’s philosophizing won him an ovation from his classmates. After that he became even more talkative in class, continually waving his hand to be called upon. He followed Marva around like a puppy, telling her about his latest book. One day he was shadowing her so closely that she jumped when he burst into a description of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Marva laughed and hugged him. Only months before, if that child had been sneaking up behind someone, it surely would not have been to discuss a book.

Some days there was no question that the children were learning. Other times I felt as though I wasn’t really getting through to them. I invested all my energy and effort in trying to make my students special, trying to separate them from the others out on the street. Yet they seemed to backslide so easily.

Gary Love pouted and lapsed back into a defeatist attitude the minute something looked difficult. And Tracy Shanklin seemed to

forget more than she remembered. She was trying to do the work, but it took me nearly four months to teach her how to subtract twenty-seven from thirty. Once in a while Allen came to class smelling so bad that no one wanted to sit next to him. Erika had come far with her academic skills, but she still lacked social presence. She still walked on the backs of her shoes, let her nose run, barked at the other children, and fought for the limelight in every discussion.

I had to keep reminding myself where these children had been; they had all taken giant steps forward. I could measure their progress in the small daily victories, as when Gary took homework papers home and returned them the next day or Tracy read aloud excitedly and enthusiastically. However, I needed more. Since I was running a one-room school without official accreditation (Illinois law did not require private schools to be registered or recognized by the state), I needed some traditional proof that my student were learning——in the form of test scores. If my experience at Delano had done anything, it had made me cynical enough to know that their achievement had to be documented in some way. Of course, what test could measure a change in their attitudes, their priorities, their philosophy about life?

Toward the end of May I led my students through practice runs of the Stanford-Binet and the Iowa Achievement Tests, just as older students study for college boards or the bar exam. I made sure my children knew how to follow directions. I remade sure my children knew how to follow directions. I reviewed the language used in test questions, words like integer, inversion, transformation, obtuse angle, and acute angle. And I went over the symbols for greater than, less than, congruent, parallel, perpendicular, equal to, not equal to, equilateral, and so on. I knew my children had the knowledge, and I wanted to make sure they would not be stumped by the phrasing of a test question.

When the day came for official testing, I administered the Stanford-Binet series. First I reassured the children that the tests were not going to show who was smarter than someone else. They were only a tool for me to use in determining which subjects needed

more of our attention in class. When the results were tabulated, I was delighted.

I had not expected miracles, only solid improvement, and there was plenty of that. Even the children who had entered the school in January had increased their reading and math comprehension substantially in a matter of months. George Beecher, for example, who was at a third grade, fifth month (3.5) level when he arrived, jumped up to 4.2. Tracy and Erika showed even more dramatic gains. Neither had been able to read a word back in September. By the end of our first school year Tracy, at age seven, scored 3.7 and first-grade Erika tested at 4.2. The biggest surprise, however, was eight-year-old Allen, who tested at a seventh grade level.

It had been a wonderful year for the children. They had achieved in our one-room schools as they could not have in schools with large budgets, resource centers, and all sorts of teaching aids and audio-visual equipment. The most important reason was that their attitude about school had changed.

On the last day of the school year I couldn't get the children out the door.

"What is this?" I laughed. "Don't you know that children are supposed to be excited about vacation? You're supposed to be happy about being out of school. Don't you know that?"

"No!" they sang out.

"What have I done to you? Lord, what have I created?" I teased, throwing my hands up in mock despair. "I love you all, but I need to get off my feet. And I've worked you so hard all year long, you deserve a rest, too. But remember, a rest from school is not a rest from what?"

"From learning," they chorused.

"And what are you going to do over the summer?"

"Read ten books."

"And I am going to read all twenty books on the list, because I won't know which ten you choose. At this school you can never what?"

"You can never fool Mrs. Collins," they roared.

Chapter 11.

At the end of the year I decided to take the school out of Daniel Hale Williams University. I appreciated the free space they had given us to get the school going, but I wanted to be independent. The university was involved too much in politics, and I thought it best to separate the school from that environment. The group of women who had helped organize the school said that since I had been running the school, I had their permission to take it over as my own. They told me I could take the students with me, some books and supplies, and even the name of the school.

When I first told Clarence what I wanted to do, he didn't say that I was crazy or even that having my own school was a crazy idea. I spent nights talking to him, discussing the finances of operating a school, the physical space requirements, and above all my purpose. After a few weeks of considering the project, I launched into the paper shuffling. First off, I shortened the name to Westside Preparatory School. I had to incorporate as a not-for-profit organization to get tax-exempt status. Then Clarence and I began hunting for a location. We drove around Garfield Park checking for space in day-care centers and churches, but we found the same dead end wherever we looked. Either the rent was too high or people didn't want the kind of children my school would have. They had visions of rowdy disruptive children stealing and vandalizing.

By the middle of July I had exhausted all the possibilities. I decided to use what I had——the vacant upstairs apartment in my two-flat house. Clarence did all the work. He pulled out kitchen cabinets and plumbing, removed the sink, stove, and refrigerator, knocked down walls and rebuilt new ones, and installed new lighting fixtures. He hammered and sawed long into each night and all through the weekends. By the end of summer I had my school——a classroom fashioned out of a kitchen and the adjacent family room.

For seed money to get the school started, I had planned on using the $5,000 I had withdrawn from my pension upon leaving

Delano. However, the construction materials and the attorney's fees for incorporating the school had eaten up most of the money. There wasn't enough left for desks and blackboards and teaching materials.

Still, if the odds were against me in starting a school, luck was in my favor. In late August I received a call from a friend telling me about a suburban school district that was getting rid of desks and blackboards. This friend, who owned a chain of hardware stores and served on his local school board, bought up some of the desks and blackboards as well as a duplicating machine, a record player, and a set of children's encyclopedias. He sent them to me to the store delivery trucks. With this windfall and the books I had accumulated the previous year, Westside Preparatory School was nearly ready.

Taking my household money, I bought fifteen more desks. Then I began a letter-writing campaign to neighborhood banks and businesses, telling them about the school and its objective: to help the children in Garfield Park make something of themselves. I asked for whatever support they could give——not money but office supplies, and old typewriter, or perhaps a water cooler. The response was poor. All I received were reams of scrap paper, much of it from the probate court of Cook County. I used all that paper and more in mimeographing math problems, reading lists, word definitions, phonics exercises, and short stories (in lieu of textbooks). Still, the absence of any substantial public backing was a disappointment. From then on, whatever I had to do I would do myself. The school was going to make it. I would see to that.

In September I had an enrollment of eighteen children. Tracy, Erika, George, and Theodore returned, as did most of my previous students. Naturally my daughter Cindy was also there. I had lost Allen. His father refused to send him to a school in someone's house. Janette had moved to another part of the city, and so had another of my girls, nine-year-old Patricia Washington. Her new house was beautiful, her school was big and sprawling, but, as she told me in a phone call, "They don't hug and touch in the school out here."

There were three new children to take their places. One was an eleven year old named Laura Brown who spelled every word with

jumbled letters. Then I had a pre-schooler, four-year-old Calvin Graham. And the third new student was my son Patrick.

I had begun to feel that Patty needed someone to challenge him more, to light a fire under him. Recently he had been doing well enough in a "progressive" private school, but I was convinced he could realize more of his potential in an environment where the educational aims were more clearly defined. Not every child benefits from a "progressive" education; some children need more direction and prodding than others. A child who is a self-starter, already ambitious and motivated, may do well in a situation where students have the freedom to set their own goals. For the child who isn't as well motivated, that freedom may result in goals that are set too low.

Over the years, I have come to believe that some of the problems plaguing modern education are the result of the emphasis placed on "progressive" teaching methods. In an effort to follow John Dewey's notion of a student-centered rather than subject-centered approach to learning, schools have too often sacrificed subject matter, being more concerned with how they taught rather than what they taught. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, when our society was becoming fascinated with pop psychology, many young men and women entered the teaching profession thinking "As long as I can related to a child, what difference does it make if he or she can't spell cat?"

Dewey's philosophy has been misconstrued, misapplied, and frequently seized upon as a convenient rationale for not teaching fundamental material. When parents and school boards have challenged the subject competency of teachers and accused schools of not teaching basic skills, administrators and teaching theorists have rushed to the defense, claiming that "humanistic" education is more important than knowledge.

The problem is that some schools cannot strike a balance between "progressive" and "traditional" teaching methods. People wrongly assume that it has to be one or the other. If you teach the baics in a classical curriculum, you can still pay attention to a child's feelings and attitudes. Moreover, it is a mistake to assume that in

order to stimulate creativity and critical thinking you must rule out any learning by rote. Memorization is the only way to teach such things as phonics, grammar, spelling, and multiplication tables.

There is a tendency in education to reject arbitrarily a method of teaching simply because it's old-fashioned. The fact is a teacher can combine both progressive and traditional approaches to learning, each enhancing the other. There is no reason why a teacher can't be sensitive to a child's needs and at the same time teach the child subject matter and skills. That blend was always been the basic of Westside Preparatory School.

School was scheduled to begin at nine o'clock. That had true only on the first day. By the second day, and always after that, school started as soon as the first child arrived, as early as 7:30. The first child would come into the kitchen with my family, and I would begin a review of whatever subject he or she was weak in. while I cleared off the table, combed my hair, and put on lipstick, the child would linger for a few minutes, sipping a glass of juice of eating leftover bacon or flapjacks. As I was finishing my morning household routine, we could begin the drills on math, questions about the readings, or working out the sounds of letters. Which a in cake? Which o in boat? Which i in light? I fired off the questions as I darted from the kitchen to the bathroom to the bedroom. And between bites of breakfast the child responded. Then we would move upstairs and write words on the board, putting in the diacritical markings, of course, I would look over the homework papers so that I could see whether the child was ready to move ahead to something new.

I gave homework every day, though never in massive doses. A child should not have to do thirty math problems overnight. Five or ten problems are enough to see if a child knows what he is doing. I didn't give homework as busy work, but to reinforce a lesson. And I never gave homework until I was certain that the child could do it successfully. I didn't want parents to have to help. Homework was for the benefit of the child, not the parents.

When I saw a child ready to leave at the end of the day without his or her papers, my standard comment was: "Unless you are a

genius or your daddy is a millionaire, you cannot afford to leave your books here and not do your homework."

I never punished or reprimanded a child for not turning in homework, I simply reminded all my students that they would not receive their report cards (written evaluations instead of grades) if they did not turn in their daily homework. It was one more way of teaching them about what would be expected of them in the adult world, where rewards are based on performance.

"if you don't do your job, your employer will not give you a paycheck," I reminded them. "No one is going to pay you for something you don't do. Remember what Kahlil Gibran said: 'If this is your day of harvest, in which fields have you sown your seeds?' For now, going to school is your job, and doing homework is one of the responsibilities of that job. I don't want to hear 'The dog ate my paper' or 'My baby brother tore up my report.' We can't go through life giving excuses for what we don't do."

At Westside Preparatory School there was nowhere to escape learning. Even the bathrooms had phonics charts tacked on the walls. Marva's classroom was organized and efficient, yet it had the friendly comfortable clutter of a house. Thirty desks were squeezed into the cramped space. Paperbacks and worn hardcover classics were piled in teetering stacks on the floor and on the shelves of an old bookcase.

As in any one-room schoolhouse, different activities were going on all at once. During mathematics some children might be doing addition and subtraction, others multiplication, others long division, while still others might be learning to reduce fractions. Marva walked the aisles, reading over the children's shoulders as they worked. She didn't wait for them to ask for help. She made herself always accessible, for she knew that children are usually hesitant to walk the long mile to the front of the classroom and announce that they do not understand. Often the confused child stayed in his seat and forgot about solving problems until he fell so far behind that he gave up completely.

"Six times five can't be eleven," Marva said, spotting an error on one of the girls' papers. "Sweetheart, remember you are adding six

five times. We're going to cheat you out of all your money if you can't multiply."

She glanced up and saw another girl chewing gum.

"Get the gum out of your mouth, sweetheart," she said firmly. Then lovingly, "Put it in the garbage and not in your pretty hands."

On her way to Laura Brown's desk she stopped to pick up some papers scattered on the floor beside George. She handed them to him, "I think we're just going to have to get you a secretary," she teased, "because you can't seem to keep your things in order." Mussing his hair, she moved to Laura, the girl who scrambled her letters like alphabet soup and made backward twos, fours, and nines.

"Peach, didn't anyone ever tell you not to go over the margin of the paper? You begin to the right of the red line, like this." She picked up the girl's pencil and printed Laura's name on the page. "See, we print our letters and numbers neatly on the paper. We don't make scratch marks all over it going every which way."

Looking up, she saw Calvin sitting with his index finger in his mouth. "Sweetheart, take your finger out of your mouth. You're a big boy now."

As she turned back to Laura, there was a loud scraping noise. Gary had scooted forward in his desk. "You did a good job of pushing that desk," she told him. "Mommy told you to get up this morning and go to school so you could push a desk, didn't she? You get good jobs pushing desks, don't you?"

Nothing escaped her. She was aware of all things at all times, and without losing her focus, she could address every one of them. She could tell a girl to stop combing her hair, tell a boy to tuck in his shirt, or another to blow his nose, without once losing the attention or concentration of the particular child she was working with. Marva just squeezed Laura's shoulder to remind her that the teacher was still there for her.

Reading lessons were in groups. While Marva worked with one group, pointing out words to watch and giving background on a story, the other students busied themselves with comprehension exercises, theme writing, researching an author or topic in the

encyclopedia, composing sentences, and doing analogies ("Photograph is to caricature as fact is to exaggeration").

One morning during reading Gary announced, "I'm finished." He slammed his book shut on his paper, a letter to Robinson Crusoe offering encouragement and survival tips. He stood beside his desk with his hands in his pockets, looking as though he was about to take off for a leisurely stroll around the classroom.

Marva had been working with Theodore, tutoring him from a high school literature book so that he would be ready for the high school placement exam. She shot Gary a disapproving glare.

"Don't give me that 'I'm finished' business," she said, "We are never finished in life. We don't ever stand around idly or sit with our hands folded, acquiescing. God isn't finished with you and I'm not either."

"Okay, okay, don't have a coronary," Gary said, sitting down and holding up his palms in surrender.

Marva laughed. "I love your spunk. Don't ever let anyone break your will. Since you are finished, why don't you read us your theme?"

Gary withdrew the paper from his book and began to read aloud: "Dear Mr. Crusoe, You will feel better if you have courage, strength, and patience. You need tenacity."

"Tenacity!" Marva exclaimed. "Gary, that is terrific. Since you have done such a wonderful job of helping Mr. Crusoe, why don't you take one of the younger children out on the stairs and help him with his sounds. You help him the way I helped you."

The buddy system was an integral part of life at Westside Prep. It helped the new children feel more comfortable and adjust faster, and it offered the seasoned students a review of the material and developed their sense of responsibility. The buddy system was invaluable for Gary, who tended to become wrapped up in himself, and especially beneficial for Erika, who still didn't get along well with the other children.

The first time Marva solicited her help, Erika was learning against the wall, rubbing her head up and down against it, and chewing on a pencil.

"We eat our food, not our pencils," Marva told her. Erika removed the pencil from her mouth but continued to rub her head against the wall. Marva handed her a copy of Professor Phonics Gives Sound Advice and asked her to go over the word lists with Calvin.

"Huh?" Erika wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"If you have a question, say 'What, Mrs. Collins?' And don't wipe your nose on your dress. Take a tissue. Do you see me wiping my nose on my dress? Do what you see me do. Now, I want you to help Calvin the same way I helped you. We have to pass on what we learn in here. We are all responsible for one another."

Erika shook her head. "I can't."

"By now you know we don't ever say 'I can't' in here. A year ago you said you couldn't read and now look at you. You are so bright and you learn so fast. I need you to help me with a new student."

Thinking it over for a moment, Erika led the boy to the stairs and did a perfect imitation of Marva as she coached Calvin through the long and short vowel sounds. Her voice was too loud but there was a reassuring, patient quality to it. Marva overheard her telling Calvin, "You can do it."

Ultimately, tutoring the other students drew Erika out. When Marva added more pre-schoolers to the class roster, Erika teamed up with Cindy and taught them beginning sounds, read them fairy tales, and pointed out the moral in such verses as:

There once was a boy named Pierre
Who would only say "I don't care."
His mother said, "Stop pouring syrup on your hair."
Pierre said, "I don't care."

In her desire to emulate Marva, Erika proved to be a natural teacher herself. And being responsible for other students seemed to make her more responsible for herself. She slowly became more fastidious about her appearance. Perhaps she reasoned that as a teacher she had to set an example, as Mrs. Collins did.

Four years after she arrived at Westside Preparatory School as a defeated, backward, asocial child, Erika McCoy wrote:

If Fredrick Douglass can, so can I. if Fredrick Douglass could learn when learning seemed almost impossible for a black man, so can I. if Fredrick Douglass could free our people from the bondage of slavery, surely I can free my people from the bondage of ignorance. If Fredrick Douglass could conquer the impossible, surely I can conquer ignorance. If Fredrick Douglass could deliver speeches to thousands of people, surely I can deliver a speech to the few. If Fredrick Douglass could scale the high walk of success, surely I can too.

Chapter 12.

Throughout the year, as in every year of my teaching, my main goal was to motivate the students to make something worthwhile of their lives. Everything we said or did in class was directed toward that aim. More than anything I wanted to supplant apathy and defeatism with positive expectations. I didn't want my children to feel stigmatized by where they lived. I didn't want them to succumb to a ghetto mentality. If I had my way, they would dream and hope and strive and obtain success.

I was forever compiling lists of positive, motivating slogans:

You are unique——there is no one else like you

The world moves aside to let you pass only if you Know where you are going

Character is what you know you are and not what others think you are

You know you better than anyone else in this world

People's ideas actually tell you how they feel about themselves

And I was constantly reminding the children that some of the greatest people in history——Socrates, Milton, Galileo, Einstein, Edison, and Columbus——were ridiculed and told they would never amout to anything.

Every day I put a different quotation on the board:

What I do concerns me, not what others think of me

Hitch your wagon to a star (Emerson)

Vivere est cogitare (Cicero)

Speak the speech trippingly on the tongue (Hamlet)

Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once (Julius Caesar)

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation (Thoreau)

He who eats my bread does my will

I felt it was as important to deal with attitudes as with any of the academic subjects. In fact it is probably more important. Without the right attitude, everything else is wasted.

I told the girls not to walk around with their socks falling down like a scrubwoman's or with their nail polish chipped. My eleven- and twelve-year-old girls were instructed not to wear plunging necklines or walk around looking like dimestore floozies. Everyone knew there would be no gum chewing, nail biting, unbuttoned shirts, loose shirt tails, jazzy walks, jive talk, or finger snapping.

I'd ask the children, "How are you going to run a corporation if you can't run yourself? Are you going to sit behind a conference table in an executive suite popping gum or sticking your fingers in your mouth? How are you going to keep your life in order if you can't keep your appearance or your desk or your notebook in order?"

My approach is to address a fault without even attacking a child's character. Who they were was always separate and distinct from what they did. The gum chewing was displeasing, not the child. I might tell a child, "You are acting like a fool. Why? You are not a fool." With that difference clearly established, the children could open themselves to my comments and criticisms. A child could give up the behavior without giving up any dignity or self-worth. I tried to show the children that I wasn't sticking them with an arbitrary list of do's and don'ts. These were the rules of etiquette observed in the adult world.

"Do not ever mouth off to an adult," I warned. "I don't care how wrong the adult is, just say 'yes' or 'no.' I don't care what the rest of society is doing. I don't care how many people tell you not to take anything from anyone, I want you to know when to do and say the right thing.

"There is a time to talk and a time to shut up. A time to be proud and a time to be humble. When a policeman says stop, he means stop and not go. Black children get in more trouble because they mouth off. Why get beaten up or even killed because you didn't know when to keep your mouth shut? If I teach you Shakespeare and Cicero and Dostoevsky, what good is it going to do you if you don't live to tell it?"

I prepared my children for life. And I didn't mince any words in doing it. I didn't hesitate to discuss crime in the ghetto, drugs, prison, or teenage pregnancy. I told them welfare is just another

form of slavery. I warned them not to hang out on street corners or places they didn't belong, because they could easily be picked up and arrested for something they didn't do. And I bluntly told them to face the fact that on one was going to hire them for a job if they walked into an office wearing picks in their hair, if they slinked into a room as though their hips were broken, or if the boys wore earrings or high-heeled shoes or wide-brimmed hats.

I think it's foolish and hypocritical that many people allow black youths to take on extreme styles and mannerisms under the guise of finding their black identity——without pointing out the social and economic consequences. I reminded my students that black don't go to work only for blacks. I encouraged them to become universal people, citizens of the world.

I did not teach black history as a subject apart from American history, emphasize black heroes over white, or preach black consciousness rather than a sense of the larger society. My refusal to do so was a sore spot between me and some members of the black community. As far as I was concerned, it was a waste of precious class time to teach a child that he or she was black.

I'd say to my students, "Is there anyone in here who doesn't know he's black?" And the children would shake their heads and laugh. Then I'd ask, "Is there any black child in here who plans on turning white?" Again there would be laughter. "In that case let's get on with the business of learning."

I'm opposed to teaching black English because it separates black chidren from the rest of society; it also implies they are too inferior to learn standard language usage. How many black youths are cut off from the job market because they do not have a command of the English language? I was convinced black English was another barrier confining my students to the ghetto, and I had no intention of letting them be confined. I cautioned my children. "When you don't know the language, people are always going to take advantage of you. It's like being a visitor in a foreign country."

Instead of teaching black pride I taught my children self-pride. All I wanted was for them to accept themselves. I pointed out that in many ways the ghetto is a state of mind. If you have a positive

attitude about yourself, then no one can put you down for who you are or where you live.

The concept of self-determination goes hand in hand with self-discipline. The general rule in my class was that behavior contribution to the learning process or benefiting another child was acceptable. Anything that took away another child's right to learn was not. Talking in the classroom, for example, was not prohibited per se; my response depended on the nature of the conversation and when it was taking place. Certainly no one was free to interrupt me or anyone else who was speaking or reciting. If a child was talking about lunch or any other personal business, then the next child did not need to hear it. If the talk was about how to put together a car engine or about a character in a story, then it was helping me teach.

Fighting upset me more than anything else, and my students knew it. I told them that when they fought they didn't hurt each other, they hurt me. It meant I failed to teach them what values were important in life. I never took asides in a student scuffle, and I refused to hear who threw the first punch. Instead of listening to any feeble excuse about who did what to whom, I had the two culprits embrace and say "I love you" to one another. It was a fairly good peace-keeping technique——most of the time.

One morning in the beginning of November eleven year-old Sonya walked into the classroom with fresh scratches across her face. She looked like a cat had attacked her.

"What happened?" I asked, putting cocoa butter on the wounds.

"Lynette did it," Sonya mumbled, "She did it on the bus."

"On the bus? You mean the two of you were fighting on the city bus?"

Sonya nodded.

"Didn't the passengers stop you? What did the bus driver do?"

"Nothing."

I was furious. The moment Lynette sauntered into the room, I called both girls over to me. "Whatever you girls go, you represent me," I told them. "Imagine, someone on the bus could have said, 'Those girls go to Westside Preparatory School.' I bet no one on the

bus knew you girls read Shakespeare or Socrates or Emerson. All they saw were two wild cats clawing at each other in public. So all I have done, all that I have taught you has been for nothing."

"I didn't start it. She did." Lynette insisted.

"I don't want to hear that," I said. "I don't care who started it or who finished it. How much are you worth to yourself? Are you willing to destroy yourself to get back at someone? Do you have to prove to the crowd that you take nothing from no one? Do you have to prove you're tough? Don't throw away your life."

I was angry and the girls knew it. I made them apologize. They did it begrudgingly and quickly went to their seats. The scratching incident disturbed me because it was different from the usual sort of classroom skirmishes, where one child mischievously shoves another or sticks a foot in the aisle to trip a classmate. Theirs was a real fight, presenting something more hateful, more violent. I couldn't let the matter drop.

"Children," I said to the entire class, "when you're willing to destroy one another, how can you complain about society being racist? Until you learn to help and love each other, don't talk about what other people are doing to you."

"I don't believe in saying 'Oh, he's just a child' or 'She'd just a child.' The way you act as children will determine what kind of adults you become. School is a miniature society where we learn and practice to become useful adults. You must use your time wisely. We can't begin to make something of our lives when we are filled with hate. It's not an easy thing, but you've got to learn to walk away from your enemies. If you don't', they will drag you down."

The children were all listening silently. I don't think I was getting through to them. Suddenly I felt ineffectual.

I was shaken once again by the fear that I had made no real change in the lives of my students. Of course they were memorizing poetry and quoting the classics. Was it all mimicry? What I so desperately wanted to give them was the substance, not the trappings, of an education. The fighting episode was a painful indication that I might not have succeeded. It nagged at me all day. By evening it provoked me to compose a "school creed".

Society will draw a circle that shuts me out, but my superior thoughts will draw me in. I was born to win if I do not spend too much time trying to fail. I will ignore the tags and

Names given me by society since only I know what I have the ability to become. Failure is just as easy to combat as success is to obtain. Education is painful and not gained by playing games. Yet it is my privilege to destroy myself if that is what I choose to do. I have the right to fail, but I do not have the right to take other people with me. God made me the captain of only one life——my own.

It is my right to care nothing about myself, but I must be willing to accept the consequences for that failure, and I must never thing that those who have chosen to work, while I played, rested, and slept, will share their bounties with me.

My success and my education can be companions that no misfortune can depress, no crime can destroy, and no enemy can alienate. Without education, man is a slave, a savage wandering from here to there believing whatever he is told.

Time and chance come to us all. I can be either hesitant or courageous. I can swiftly stand up and shout:"This is my time and my place. I will accept the challenge."

I had said all this before in many different ways. These maxims were the cornerstone of my teaching. Now they were solidified into something whole. The next morning I told the children they would recite the creed every day until they knew it by heart.

"My hope," I explained, "is not that you will look literate but that you will be literate. Remember the story of the emperor's new clothes? I don't want to turn you into a bunch of emperors running around without any clothes. I don't want you to pretend you are educated. I want you to act and think like educated people all the time."

Then I reminded the children of the lessons in Tolstoy's tale "The Three Questions."

"Who is the most important person?" I asked.

"I am," the children shouted.

"What is the most important thing?"

"To do good."

"And what is the most important time?"

"Now!"

A few months were sufficient to dispel all my romantic visions about starting up a school of my own. It was one thing to teach, another to be also principal, secretary, janitor, and pencil sharpener. The roughest part was keeping the school afloat financially. Though the school was in my house, the income from tuition was barely enough to cover the operating expenses. Only half my students were paying the full $70 per month tuition. Some paid what they could afford; others didn't pay anything at all. When the money came in, it was in dribs and drabs. Meanwhile there were monthly bills for utilities, insurance, and supplies.

Clarence gave me his full support. He never spoke a word of resentment about the eighteen hours a day I frequently put into my teaching. Only when he judged my enthusiasm had gone too far afield would he ask, "Whose children are you talking about? The ones in the school or our own?" it was his way of reminding me there was more to life than school.

Without him there would have been no Westside Preparatory School. He was the strong silent partner. I had one kind of strength. Clarence had another. When the bills added up and our money ran out, he rolled up his sleeves and took on part-time carpentry and construction jobs.

I found weekend work typing medical reports, as I had done before, but the financial pressures didn't ease. Besides the school costs, Clarence and I were having a difficult time managing our household budge. For the past year I had been receiving a small salary as a curriculum developer for the Alternative Schools Network, but it was $10,000 less than what I had earned at Delano.

On top of the monetary problems, I had to contend with a relentless parade of city inspectors knocking at the door with their building and fire codes. Despite the fact that Clarence had complied with the city's specifications when building the one-room school, the inspectors continued to badger me. I couldn't understand why they seemed so intent on making Westside Prep into the model for

building standards when there were schools in the Chicago system that were downright hazardous. Several public schools long slated for demolition or structural renovation were still making do with failing ceiling plaster and rickety fourth-floor staircases. In some schools students were meeting in makeshift basement classrooms with exposed steam pipes sweating overhead.

I telephoned City Hall and complained. I said I wanted to be allowed to teach. I preferred to do it peacefully in my own school, but if I had to I'd teach on the steps of City Hall. I explained that my students were not costing the taxpayers any money; by educating these children I was in fact keeping them off welfare rolls in the future.

For months the inspections continued and so did my complaints. Eventually the inspectors stopped hounding the school. Maybe they had just tired of my persistence.

Between the bills and the city bureaucracy, each day was a contest for survival. I had to do whatever I could to keep the school going. I knew the school would work only if I made it work. And the children worked because I did.

My goal is to have my students know a little about everything. "The knowledge you put in your heads is like money in the bank," I told them. "You may not need it today, but it is there to use when you need it. You may not always remember everything you are reading and learning, but you are storing it in your minds for the future. Someday when someone mentions Dostoyevsky, you won't have to stand there looking surprised and thinking it's the name of a Russian dance."

Once children learn how to learn, nothing is going to narrow their minds. The essence of teaching is to make learning contagious, to have one idea spark another. A discussion of Little Women included everything from a lesson on the Civil War to an explanation of the allegory in The Pilgrim's Progress, which the little women in Alcott's novel loved to act out. When the children studied Aristotle, they learned the principles of logical thinking. Plato's Republic led to de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, which led to a discussion of different political systems, which brought in Orwell's Animal Farm,

which touched off a discussion of Machiavelli, which led to a look at Chicago's city council.

Through the riddle of the Sphinx, which appeared in the second grade reader, the children were also introduced to Sphocles' Oedipus Rex, the Greek theater, and other heroes and legends of ancient Greece. Mention of the Roman deity Jupiter, lord of heaven and prince of light, triggered a science lesson on the solar system, which brought in the ancient geographer and astronomer Ptolemy, then Copernicus, then Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, and the U.S. space program. Archimedes' discovery of water displacement and specific gravity tied in to Sir Isaac Newton's work with gravity and light, which in turn spurred an introduction to Einstein's theory of relativity. When I taught Voltaire's Candide, I pulled in Pope's "Essay on Man" and Leibnitz and the "optimistic" school of philosophy. If I was teaching Chaucer, I introduced Boccaccio, telling the children how Chaucer drew his "Clerk's Tale" from Boccaccio's "Patient Grisel."

In one of the most unlikely progressions of learning I began talking once about triangles and ended up with Hinduism. The children learned that Pythagoras figured out how to measure the side of a right triangle, the Pythagoras was a philosopher who believed the human soul was immortal, and that his idea of the transmigration of souls was part of the Hindu religion.

For every story the children read in their basal readers, I brought supplementary material. I also pointed out every allusion in a story, not ignoring a single footnote at the bottom of a page. I blitzed the children with facts, but I did not go into all subjects in detail. Mostly, I hit upon them in a generalized way. I wanted to get my students to see the flow of knowledge.

Every day there were frenzied classroom exchanges between Marva and the children as she tested their memories and pushed them to draw analogies.

"What drug takes its name from Morpheus, the god of dreams?"

"Morphine," the children called out in unison.

"From where do we get the words geography and geology?"

"The goddess Ge," they answered.

"Who was Ge?"

"Greek goddess of the earth."

"The word choreography comes from which of the nine muses?"

"Terpsichore."

"Sacred hymns are inspired by which muse?"

"Polyhymnia."

"Which breakfast food do we get from the grain goddess Ceres?"

"Cereal."

"What does museum mean?"

"Temple of the muses."

"And what is a muse?"

"A Greek goddess."

"How many muses were there?"

"Nine,"

"What else does the word muse mean, Laura?"

"To think about something," she answered.

"Let's give her a hand," Marva said. And the class applauded. Then Marva went on. "Which of King Priam's sons has a name that means to bully?"

"Hector," the class responded.

"And who killed Hector?"

"Achilles."

"How did Achilles die?"

"Paris shot him with an arrow in the heel," Gary shouted, before anyone else could put together a complete sentence.

"And when we use the phrase 'Achilles's hell', what do we mean, Tracy?"

"A weak spot," Tracy said.

"When we have a weak spot, we are what?"

"Vulnerable," replied Erika.

"Which one of Ovid's stories is similar to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet?"

"Pyramus and Thisbe," the children chorused.

"George, which Bible story is like the story of Orpheus and Eurydice?"

"The story of Lot and his wife," he answered.

Theodore shouted, "Hey, Mrs. Collins, that's cool. Everything links into something else, doesn't it?"

Marva beamed, "Now you've got it. Every scholar, every writer, every thinker learned from those who came before. You are all becoming so erudite, we are going to have to dub you MGM—— Mentally Gifted Minors."

I read constantly in order to the together fragments of information and interweave subjects. As a business major in college I had not taken many courses in the arts and sciences. My education was about the same as that of the average grammar school teacher, merely a sampling of some basic courses. I had to teach myself more. I read with an urgency so I could teach my students what they needed to know. I believe a teacher has to keep polishing his or her skills. You can't take the attitude "I know how to teach," and resist learning anything new.

I was always on the lookout for a new book to spark my children's interest. Teaching children to read was one thing; keeping them interested in reading was something else. I was forever reading up on new children's books in The New York Times Book Review, the local Sunday newspapers, and the Library Journal. I searched through Masterplots and Children's Treasury for the Taking. And I stalked bookstores and libraries on a regular basis.

I feel that to be a good elementary school teacher one needs to have a general knowledge about all fields of study. The best training a teacher can have is a solid liberal arts education. Instead of emphasizing methods courses, training institutions should require education majors to have a broad background in literature, science, art, music, and philosophy. The object of teaching is to impart as much knowledge as possible. Students can only give back what a teacher gives out.

Eventually my children began to recognize parallels and relationships on their own. Sometimes when they recited their compositions, they would summon forth a plethora of citations. Laura Brown, the girl who had written word salads when she first arrived at Westside Prep, wrote the following theme a year later:

Pascal said, “A man without a thought is a stone or a brute. A man is a reed, but a thinking reed.” Cicero was right——“Vivere est cogitare.” To think is to live. Let us stand up and shout this is my time. We are fools to depend upon society to make us into what we refuse to mold ourselves into. Confused aliens are Hecate’s delight.

A few days after we had read about Patrick Henry and our nation’s founding fathers, one of my eight-year-old boys turned in the following book report on Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings:

The caged bird sings because it wants to be free. It wants to sing like the other birds. It wants to swing on the limbs like the other birds. Give the caged bird freedom or give it death.

Drawing analogies and tossing off literary allusions became second nature to the children, appearing even in their jokes. Four-year-old Calvin accidentally wet his pants one day, and as I took him to the bathroom to clean him off, six-year-old Lewis shouted, “Out, out, damned spot!” Then there was the time George and Theodore were arguing. Reaching her arms beseechingly to the ceiling, Tracy called out, “Wherefore art thou, Themis, goddess of justice. We need your help, quick.” One day the group was discussing how Medea tore her sons to pieces and got revenge after Jason left her and took a new bride. “Well, you know what they say,” Erika wisecracked, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

Such learned extracts were applied as readily outside class. While Cindy and I were shopping in a department store, we saw a boy of about five crying and clinging to his mother’s skirt as she tried to purchase some cosmetics. Cindy turned to me, shook her head, and coolly remarked, “Mommy, I think that boy has an Oedipus complex.”

The children were showing off their newfound knowledge like a new toy. In the middle of the semester I took them to see the movie The Man Who Would Be King, based on the short story by Rudyard Kipling. Schools had been invited to attend a special screening of the film and hear a lecture on Kipling. My children were already well acquainted with the author. They knew his Just So Stories and The

Jungle Book, and some had memorized "If" for their weekly poetry recitation.

As the children filed into the theater, the guest lecturer came running up to me, "Oh, there must be some mistake," he said. "Your children won't understand or appreciate this."

Looking around the auditorium, I saw that most of the audience was of high school age. "You just lecture the way you normally would to the older students. Don't worry about my children."

When the movie was over, the speaker began talking about Kipline's life, his schooling in Britain and his return to India at the age of eighteen. George began shaking his head vehemently. Suddenly his hand shot up. Squinting out into the audience, the man motioned for George to stand up. "Yes, young man, do you have a question?" he asked.

George shook his head no.

"Then what can I do for you?"

"I read in the encyclopedia that Kipling was seventeen when he went back to India," George stated, taking his seat.

Applause mixed with laughter rang out from the audience. A few of the high school boys sitting with their feet propped up flashed a victory salute and shouted. "That's the way, kid, right on!"

In any other circumstances I would not have encouraged such pedantry. With the lecturer assuming that my children wouldn't understand. I made an exception and allowed them the spotlight. Cindy asked why Kipling was so British-oriented. And George, bolstered by the earlier success, took the floor a second time. "In whose memory was the Taj Mahal built?" he asked the speaker.

"It was built by the Shah Jahan in memory of his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal."

"That's right." George nodded, satisfied with the man's answer.

In late January there were a few changes. Two new students arrived and three others left. Theodore, who had come to the school the year before reading at a third grade level. Passed the high school entrance exam and was admitted to a parochial high school. One father took his seven-year-old daughter out of Westside Prep because he could not afford the tuition. I offered to have the girl

stay on a scholarship, but the father refused, saying, "I'm as proud as you are, Mrs. Collins. I don't believe in handouts any more than you do."

Another parent withdrew her five-year-old son because she was displeased that her child wasn't doing enough "creative things"——cutting out valentines and snowflakes and making paper bag puppets. She seemed to think that white children were doing that sort of things in their progressive schools. I had no intention of having my students cut and paste and finger paint or march around with rhythm bands. Black children from inner-city neighborhoods cannot afford to spend time finger painting in school. When these children enter kindergarten, they are in most cases already behind socially and academically. Statistics show that they fall even further behind while in elementary school, so that by the sixth grade they are reading at a 2.2 level. The only way to combat that trend is to give the four and five year olds a strong start reading and writing.

That's not to say I stifle creative expression. My students were exposed to art, drama, and music but within the context of the basic curriculum, not as separate subjects. The children acted out fables and stories, wrote their own poetry and plays, and drew illustrations for the stories they read. Their reading selections included biographies of Mozart, Beethoven, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo. Our class discussions ranged from symphonies and sonatas to frescos and miniatures.

When I lost a student to coloring and cut-outs, I didn't try to dissuade his mother. Parents set their own expectations for their children, and they have to decide whether a particular school or teaching method suits their needs. Not all parents like the Montessori approach. Not all parents favor the Suzuki method of teaching children a musical instrument. So I didn't expect every parent to be satisfied with Westside Prep. I couldn't be all things to all people, and I didn't try to be.

Chapter 13.

Since my first year of teaching, my students have always learned to love Shakespeare. Even the boys who picked their teeth with switchblades and dared other teachers to make it safely to their cars in the afternoon always begged for more. At Delano I had to sneak in the lessons on Shakespears, because they were never included in the curriculum prescribed by the Board of Education.

Many educators and textbook publishers seemed to think that children should not be reading Shakespeare or, for that matter, any other great works of literature. The prevailing though among the curriculum experts was that the best way to teach inner-city children to read was through "realistic" story content: the recommended material for teaching reading skills included stories about stealing, sex, drugs, running away from home, alcoholic fathers, know-nothing mothers, children who lied and conned adults, and children who committed crimes.

For years, the textbook companies had published readers that were totally unrealistic. Parents never argued, Father always looked neat and tidy, Mother never worked and was always baking cookies, the house was always spick-and-span, and brothers and sisters never disagreed. Little Jane's hair was always perfect, and her shoes were never scuffed.

Then the publishers and experts tried to make readers more lifelike. But in the process they have gone to the opposite extreme. A selection from one popular textbook reads:

I found a piece of rope, made a noose, slipped it about the kitten's neck, pulled it over a nail, then jerked the animal clear of the ground. It gasped, sloppered, spun, doubled, clawed the air frantically; finally its mouth gaped and its pink-white tongue shot out stiffly. I tied the rope to a nail and went to find my brother.

I don't believe in sheltering children or limiting their reading to stories with a Pollyanna vision of the world. Life is chaotic and imperfect, and children should be taught to understand that. Topics

like death, greed, and violence are not taboo. They are often themes of great literature. However, some of today's textbooks smack of educational hucksterism: offer children anything; just get them to read!

According to the curriculum experts, everything has to be "relevant." One mathematics textbook has a chapter on probability that asks students to determine: what are the odds that a cabdriver will get a counterfeit $10 bill? What is the probability that a girl will become pregnant if she is taking birth control pills that are 97 percent effective? What is the probability that a person living in a certain community has either syphilis or gonorrhea?

All that "relevance" undermines the very purpose of an education. It doesn't expand the children's horizons or encourage inventiveness and curiosity. Instead if limits perspective to the grim scenes they see every day of their lives. Children do not need to read stories that teach "street smarts." They learn enough on their own. What they need are character-building stories. They need to read for values, morality, and universal truths. That was my reason for teaching classical literature.

It is senseless to hand children prepackaged, specially designed reading material when there are so many relevant lessons to be plucked from the writings of great authors. But it takes a creative, hard-working teacher to ferret out those things, to focus on the content, not the mechanics of reading.

William Shakespeare's plays were a gold mine of meaningful themes, and the students at Westside Preparatory School loved reading them. Macbeth was a special treat. The children were intrigued by the action of the play, the witches, the ghosts, and the idea of a cold, calculated murder. They came away from the play fully aware the crime exacts a price.

Students of every age level were treated to Macbeth. For the younger children, ages four and five, Marva gave a digest of the story:"Now the witches can only hurt people if those people are already evil, and since Macbeth was already inclined to do evil, the three witches persuaded him to murder King Duncan while he was a guest at Macbeth's home…" Sitting cross-legged on the floor, their

eyes glued to the storyteller, the children heard how the ghost of King Duncan haunted Macbeth and how Lady Macbeth tried to rub the imaginary bloodstains from her hands, crying, "Out, damned spot, out I say."

The students reading at a first, second, or third grade level received a narrative adaptation of Macbeth from Favorite Tales from Shakespeare by Bernard Miles. As always, the children read aloud, and periodically Marva asked each student to define a word, supply a synonym or antonym, or discuss the meaning of a paragraph.

"Did the withes make Macbeth do evil?"

"No," replied the children.

"The witches only predicted that he would do evil, Macbeth himself made the evil happen. Others can predict, but the individual determines his own life. Society predicts that you will fail. But you what? "

"Determine our own life," said Laura.

"Very, very good. Why do you think Macbeth is so depressed, so troubled?" Marva asked.

"'Cause he thinks people are going to find out how he murdered King Duncan," answered Maria, who had joined he school in January.

"He has a guilty conscience," added one of the boys.

"That's right," Marva said. "The murder ends up destroying him. That's what happens in life. People may offer us glorious things, but they don't tell us the price we have to pay for them. After the deed is done, the weird sister say, 'Macbeth shall sleep no more.' There is always a penalty to pay. If someone doesn't catch you, then your own conscience will, we don't like ourselves very much when we do something bad, do we?"

In Marva's hands Shakespeare became a vehicle for positive attitudes. The children reading the adaptation learned the themes by following the action of the play. The students reading at or above the fourth grade level pulled out meaning line by line from the original text.

"What does Duncan mean when he says, 'The love that follows us is sometimes our trouble?'"

"Sometimes we trust people and think they love us, but they turn against us," said Gary.

"Very good. And when Macbeth has second thoughts about killing Duncan, what does Lady Macbeth do?"

"She calls him a coward," said Cindy.

"She makes fun of him for not being man enough to do it," added Patrick.

"How many of you have had that happen to you?" asked Marva. "Did you ever have your friends call you a coward or a baby or a chicken because you didn't want to go along with something?"

A few of the boys looked around the room before they reluctantly nodded.

"So what does Macbeth do? What does he tell Lady Macbeth?"

"He gets her off his back by saying he's going to be a bigger man than anyone else," George said.

"So you see what happens, children? Macbeth ends up committing murder to prove he is tough. His wife ridicules him, she makes fun of his manhood, so he feels he has to o out and murder Duncan to probe he is a man. If he liked himself, if he had self-respect, he would not have had to prove anything, would he? It's the people who don't like themselves very much who make trouble for the others.

"The mess society is in today starts with people who don't like themselves. And when that's the case, nothing is going to help you, is it? Not drugs, not alcohol. Those things don't make life any better. You have to get your head on straight. Could the doctor give Lady Macbeth anything to cure her mind? Could he 'minister to a mind diseased?'"

The children shook their heads.

"What did the doctor tell Macbeth?" Marva asked.

The children ran their fingers up and down the page looking for the line, Erika blurted out, "I've got it, Mrs. Collins. He says, 'the patient must minister to himself.'"

"It's sort of like what Socrates says, isn't it, Mrs. Collins?" Gary said. "Macbeth should have known that 'Straight thinking leads to straight living.'" Gary sat back, evidently pleased with himself.

All the children were proud of themselves. Reading Shakespeare gave them an enormous sense of self-worth. Some days Marva wished the whole world could hear them, especially the experts with theories about what inner-city children should not and could not read.

The children's acquaintance with Shakespeare didn't end with Macbeth. Eventually they went on to read Twelfth Night, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Merchant of Venice, Julius Caesar, and King Lear. In the meantime Marva made sure Shakespeare remained in the children's minds. Sentences such as "Shakespeare lived in England" and "The three witches in Macbeth were evil" were given as dictation exercises, and Marc Anthony's funeral oration became part of a lesson on rhetoric and propaganda. Several of the children memorized the funeral oration or Hamlet's soliloquy for their weekly poetry recitation. Lines from the plays and sonnets became topics for daily writing assignments.

William Shakespeare had already become an old friend to the students at Westside Prep when, one morning in the spring of 1977. Marva read a story in the Chicago Sun-Times about high school students in the suburbs who did not know who Shakespeare was, when and where he lived, or what he wrote. For example, one student wrote that "the global theater was a three-sided octagon." she clipped the article and brought it to class for her students to see. It was a great ego booster. The children shouted exultant cheers, drummed victory rolls on their desks, and clasped their hands overhead, hailing themselves champions. None of their day to day small triumphs in the classroom could match their first thrill of seeing how they compared to the outside world.

"Shoot, you mean those rich high school kids in the suburbs don't know Shakespeare was born in 1564 and died in 1616?" Gary's hubris might have been the fatal flaw in many of Shakespeare's heroes, but in Marva's students it was a hard-earned and welcome virtue.

"You see," Marva said, breaking through the noise. "You make your own success. Children can go to expensive schools, but it doesn't mean they learn any more or any better. Buildings don't

teach, people teach. Everything works in here because we make It work. All the money in the world isn't going to make a difference."

That afternoon Marva gave in to some pride of her own. She wrote a letter to Sun-Times columnist Zay Smith, telling him that she had read his story and that she had students from "the allegedly fetid ghetto" who had a reading acquaintance with Shakespeare. She explained a little about her school. Marva followed up the letter with a telephone call several days later, inviting Smith to visit the school any time. "I'd match these students now with students anywhere in the suburbs," she added.

Unannounced, Smith dropped in on Westside Prep at nine o'clock the next morning. As he later wrote in his Sun-Times column, "I wasn't expecting any miracles. So I wasn't prepared for what I saw." Sitting quietly in the back of the classroom, Smith observed a typical day at Marva's school. He watched "four year olds writing sentences like 'See the physician' and 'Aesop wrote fables,' and discussing diphthongs and diacritical marks——calling them correctly by name." He heard "second-graders reciting passages from Shakespeare, Longfellow and Kipling." And "third-graders learning about Tolstoi, Sophocles and Chaucer."

Amazed at a teacher working such wonders, Smith interviewed some of the children. One girl said, "When I went to my old school I didn't learn anything. My teacher used to go around pinching our ears. Here somebody believed in me." And another girl told him, "We do hard things here. They fill your brain."

Smith's story on Westside Prep, along with a sampling of student writing (compositions on Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Aesop, and Hinduism), appeared on the third page of the Sunday edition of the Sun-Times on May 8,1977. It went out on the Sun-Times wire services and was picked up by other newspapers around the country. Readers were touched by the story of children who had been discarded as "unteachable" climbing to superior achievement in a school that was always short of books, paper, pencils, and even chalk. And Marva was catapulted into an unexpected, though not entirely unsought, spotlight.

What pleased me the most about the publicity was having people see the kinds of knowledge my students were attaining, because it had become a common assumption that the liberal arts curriculum was beyond the capacity of black children. The public response to the newspaper article was overwhelming. People started sending me ten, twenty, and thirty dollar donations. One man sent me a check with a note saying that he had read the story about a plane on his way to Nevada. He was so moved by the work I was doing that he mailed the check the minute he landed at the Las Vegas airport.

The story struck different chords in different people. For some the contributions represented an endorsement of alternative education. Is suspect other people responded to the portrayal of an underdog, a risk-taker, and educational maverick. Whatever the reasons, I was glad to get the contributions. I put every dollar into the school, buying such things as a set of The Great Books and dictionaries for every child in the class.

I had always had very strong opinions about education, and suddenly I had a public forum to air my views. Shortly after the story appeared in the newspaper, I received an invitation to speak before a gathering of educators in the Dade County, Florida public schools. They were even paying a $500 honorarium. A bit uncertain about the kind of response I would receive from my audience of teachers, I talked about phonics, recommended reading lists, and explained the methods I used to teach literature and writing skills. I discussed the importance of a positive attitude and stressed that any child could learn if a teacher cared enough to teach.

The audience reaction was mixed. Some of the teachers came up to me afterwards eager to share ideas. Others were antagonistic or just plain rude. They probably resented an ordinary classroom teacher standing up there telling them about her methods. It wasn't as though I were an expert from the Department of Education or a university professor who had researched countless learning theories. Sometimes teachers depend too much on the experts——some of whom have never taught in a classroom——instead of looking toward their colleagues for techniques and advice. Perhaps that's

one of the problems with education today. There is often a reluctance among teachers to pool information and learn from one another.

The Monday morning after my first public speaking engagement, I walked into the class with my $500 check in hand and passed it up and down the rows of desks for the children to see.

"You see," I told them, waving the check, "people will pay you for the ideas you have in your head."

"You mean you got all that money just for talking?" Gary asked.

"That's right. I talked all about phonics and the dictation I give you and the quotations I put on the board and the poetry you recite…"

"Heck, I could've told them all that," he said.

"You mean those people paid you just to tell them what we do in here every day?" Tracy sounded incredulous. Listening to me preach about the value of an education was one thing; seeing the proof was quite another.

"Yes, they did." I said, recognizing a chance to expand on my major theme. "If you have the knowledge, if you have the skills, people will come to you. You will find work. You don't need to steal or wait for someone to give you something for nothing. A free ride is never worth very much anyway. If I give you some of my clothes. I don't give you my favorite dress, do i? I'll give you something that's old and worn out, won't I? Just how much is that going to be worth to you?"

"But how come those people want to know what we do?" George asked. He and the others were still in awe of the $500.

"Because a lot of people are surprised at the kinds of things you children are learning," I told him. "Black America has been led to believe that we are supposed to fail. When we do fail, people look down on us, and that leads to a lot of hate. Things do not have to be that way. We can make them better. You were not born to fail. You were born to succeed. You were born to be millionaires! But you are going to have to learn. No one owes you a thing in this life. I don't want anyone to give you children anything——except your dignity."

By then the school year was nearly over, so the children were used to my sermonizing. Most of them had sat through two years of it, and it was taking hold. Children who had come to me lacking all confidence, convinced they couldn't do anything, were now talking about becoming doctors, judges, scientists and teachers. Sonya, one of the girls who had been fighting on the bus six months before, insisted she was going to be the first black woman president of the United States. She and the other children walked around quoting from what they had read and boasting about what they knew. They'd come to me and say, "I know this big kid in high school, and he never even heard of Dante Alighieri." To some outsiders my children may have appeared to be little know-it-alls. I loved their spirit.

Chapter 14.

Despite the financial strain, the new Westside Prep had survived its first year, and every one of my children had made progress. Now nine, Tracy was long rid of her headaches and crying and was comfortable reading more than a year above her grade level. She was even writing themes on such subjects as "The Four Major Religions of the World," with lines like: "It is not possible, the Hindus believe, to achieve perfection in one lifetime. Therefore a man is born on earth again and again."

Laura Brown, the sixth-grader who had once written every word with jumbled letters, was reading from an eighth grade book at the end of the year. George was in a twelfth grade literature book, and four-year-old Calvin was reading at a second grade level. Erika McCoy was still having trouble keeping the shoes on her feet, and the other children seemed to tolerate her more than they liked her, but at seven and a half year old she was an insatiable reader, headed into a summer vacation with Dickens, Melville, and the Bronte sisters. And Gary Love, who once resisted learning anything, had become an ambitious writer:

Somnus, god of sleep, please awaken us. While we sleep, ignorance takes over the world…Take your spell of us. We don't have long before ignorance makes a soup of the world.

That kind of success with my students made me push ahead with an almost maniacal fervor. Now, I had come to recognize, I was trying to challenge the system. And it was an inexorably demanding task. At times I felt exhausted and frustrated, I was afraid I had taken on too much. I worried about losing the school, about letting the children down, and about failing myself.

The summer offered little rest. After the Zay Smith article and my few speaking engagements, there was a steady stream of mail from people seeking my advice on educational matters. There were more offers to speak, reporters requesting interviews, and inquiries from parents who wanted to enroll their children in my school. By

September 1977 Westside Prep had an enrollment of thirty students and a waiting list of almost the same number.

All the parents had stories to tell. Some of them came to me because they refused to accept the judgment of school officials who had said their children were mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, or learning-disabled. Others came because their children had been expelled from school as behavior problems. One mother cried as she told me that her son had been suspended from school so often that he spent more time on the streets than in a classroom. She was sure Westside Prep was the only chance standing between him and reform school.

All the parents were frustrated and worried; some were desperate. One of the most distraught was Cathy Mullins' mother, who had heard about Westside Prep from a woman who happened to sit next to her on a city bus. She told me her eleven-year-old daughter, after falling far behind in school, had given up on herself. The child walked around crying all the time and had worked herself into such a nervous condition that her hair was falling out.

I took in a Cathy Mullins. Ironically, I had an easier time with Cathy than with her father. He had disagreed with his wife over enrolling their daughter in the school and he objected to my methods.

"What are you doing to our girl?" he said one afternoon during the second month of school, bursting into the room just as the children were leaving. "She's messed up enough without you giving her all these big words to learn and the Latin and the poetry. She's a slow child. Don't you know she can't do that kind of work?"

"Any child can learn if she is not taught too thoroughly that she can't," I answered curtly. I believed in every one of my students. Why didn't their parents? Criticism from parents——even when it is unintentional——tends to lodge in a child's mind, particularly if that child already has self-doubts.

"The kind of work you want Cathy to do puts too much pressure on her," Mr. Mullins said.

"Did Cathy tell you that?" I asked him. Cathy was doing well. In two months' time her reading ability had gone from a second grade

level to the fourth grade.

"Well, no. but going by what those other teachers used to say, I just figured…"

"Life is pressure, Mr. Mullins. There's no sense isolating these children or keeping them so sheltered that they won't ever be able to cope with anything. Other schools don't teach a child to push, to achieve, I do."

Some parents had the opposite complaints. They felt that I wasn't pushing their children hard enough and that the children weren't progressing fast enough. It amazed me that these parents could allow their children to get behind in school and then assume I could bring the children's skills up to the right grade level in only a few months. With some children it was possible, but others learned more slowly and needed more time to adjust and become motivated. A few times parents demanded to know why I had their child reading from an easier book or doing simpler math than the other children.

Others seemed to want to turn over all responsibility for their children to me. I believe it is the parents who must be strong and set the tone. Yet some parents don't spend time reading, don't read to their children, and don't have books around the house. Somehow they expect teachers to make their children into competent and eager readers. There are parents who don't set rules and limitations for their children, yet they expect the teacher to maintain discipline and order in the classroom. And some parents wonder why their children don't do homework, yet at home these same children are never given responsibilities or chores.

If I wasn't battling the parents' criticisms, then I was fighting their apathy. Some of the very same parents who had pleaded with me to rescue their children washed their hands of any further involvement once the children were in my school. Some even avoided paying the tuition. When there was real hardship, when a parent was out of work or ill, I accepted a child on scholarship. A few parents paid whatever they could afford each month. In lieu of tuition a few mothers helped out answering the telephone, opening

mail, and copying selections from textbooks. The increased enrollment meant more work of all kinds, not just more teaching.

What infuriated me though, was that parents who seemed to have money to spend on other things, didn't seem to feel that paying for their children's education was a priority; they wanted an education for their children for nothing, without lifting a finger to help themselves. To a great degree, they too had to be educated.

In the meantime, I still had the burden of supporting my cash-starved school. I continually had to remind parents of their overdue payments. They responded by saying they had no money to give. I told them, if you are not willing to work for your child, please do not lean on the rest of us. Not all of my students had "caring parents." Some of them didn't give a damn about what happened to their children, though I struggled every step of the way to teach them. Yet, finally, when many of my students were reading and learning material well beyond their age level, there were parents who declared there had never been a learning problem in the first place.

However, I was determined not to let my students grow up having such short memories. What upset me was the idea of people forgetting where they had come form. So I repeatedly warned my students, "Don't you ever forget what you started from when you first came to this school. Don't forget how envious and ashamed you were because you couldn't read as well as some of your classmates. Don't forget, because when you grow up and finish college, you are the ones who are going to have to come back here to neighborhoods like Garfield Park and turn them into places people went to live in and not run away from."

The number of students really didn't make a difference. Even with thirty children I ran the classroom the same way I had done the previous year. I struggled to parcel out individualized attention, while keeping up the momentum of the class as a whole. I moved from child to child, correcting mistakes on the spot and giving instant feedback on every paper as soon as it was completed. And still I tried to catch sight of everything: a child talking or throwing a paper clip, resting his head on his desk or even copying——"Your

understanding must be your understanding and not your neighbor's , unless you plan on taking him with you every place you go."

As always, the emphasis for the new students was on phonics. Returning students worked in various reading groups. One group read legends, fables, Greek myths, and American tall tales; another studied selections from classics by Voltaire, Nietzsche, Goethe, Emerson, Thackeray, Dickens, Chaucer, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Swift, Dostoyevsky, Colette, Boccaccio, and Petrarch; a third group delved into biographies of Helen Keller, Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass.

Math lessons ranged from algebra and geometry for the eleven and twelve year olds to numeration and telling time for the kindergarteners. In science some children were studying the planets and the galaxy; others learned about the earth and its history; still others worked on plant and animal life, biological adaptations, and classification. And social studies lessons were just as diverse, with kindergarteners learning about building strong communities, first-graders studying citizenship and national heroes, second-graders exploring the seven continents, third-graders looking at Chicago history and politics, fourth-graders learning about state and federal government, and fifth-through eighth-graders studying various periods of American and European history.

Running a multi-level one-room school was a constant juggling act. Yet it wasn't as complicated as it might seem. Whenever possible I tried to teach subjects not in isolation but as part of a central curriculum. Language arts (reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary) were correlated with social studies and science. For example, when the children learned about the seven continents, they read a story from one of the countries under discussion. When they studied the solar system, they read about the lives of Galileo and Copernicus, compared Aristotle's theories to Talileo's, wrote reports about them, and analyzed the parts of speech in such sentences as Copernicus showed that the planets revolve around the sun.

I had always stressed vocabulary, encouraging the children to look for synonyms in the dictionary and thesaurus, teaching Latin

and Greek derivations, and explaining the meaning of prefixes such as ab (away), ad (to), com (with), dis (opposite), re (again), and so on. That fall I discovered a secret weapon for building vocabulary, a book called Vocabulary for the College-Bound Student. As it happened, my son Eric, who was then a sophomore in high school, was using the book in his English class. I frequently perused my children's textbooks——it's important for parents to know what their children are learning——and this one turned out to be a gem. I ordered copies for all the students in Westside Prep.

"Words are ideas. They make up thoughts. If our words are limited, our thoughts are limited," I said, holding up the book and pointing to its title. "You see what this says? It says for the college-bound student, not the failure-bound student. To succeed in life, you must be a thinker, and to be a thinker, you must have vocabulary."

For their first homework assignment from this book the children studied and memorized five words and definitions. I said I wanted them to learn the words, but I didn't want them to write the words ten times and then say "Hallelujah, I'm finished!"

The next day the children were all flagging their hands, eager to shout out the definitions.

"What does blithe mean?" I asked.

"Happy and cheerful," blurted out Erika, jumping the gun on everyone else.

"Laura, what's buoyant?" I asked.

"Cheerful," she answered.

"Very good. Look how far you've come. Now who can tell me another word that means cheerful?"

Calvin, who had come to the school the previous January at the age of four, was waving and shouting, "Call on me, call on me."

"All right, Calvin, what's a synonym for cheerful?"

"Jocund," he said proudly. Everyone clapped. I couldn't help beaming. I told him he was probably the only four and a half year old in the world who knew that word.

I have always believed young children can grasp complicated words, as long as the know how to syllabicate and decode sounds. No word is too difficult if a child has the right phonics tools. The only

thing standing between a young child and a difficult word is the child's fear of it. By exposing them to the complexities of language, I made sure my children were not intimidated by words.

I reinforced phonics by having my students repeat his pronunciation of words like charlatan, bronchitis, Andromache, Petrarch, and even adiadochokinesis——a medical term (describing a muscular disorder) some of my boys discovered on their own while playing a dictionary game which involved trying to stump one another over pronunciations. Every day I have the children dictation, using such sentences as "The politician was accused of malfeasance" or "The president was lionized by the people." Whenever I spoke, I tried to supplement their vocabulary by serving up new words. And I urged them to incorporate the new words into class discussion and into their compositions.

Very often the children strung together the new words the same way they did quotations. When a few of the children were reading Uncle Tom's Cabin, the assignment I gave was to compose the kind of letter Eliza might have written to her son Harry when she overhead he was going to be sold. One paper read:

My frolicsome, jocund son,

This is a time of tribulation, not jubilation. I am disconsolate over your plight, but I do not want you to be glum, doleful, and dejected because you have nostalgia. You must be brave. I love you.

In November, spurred by a suggestion from its Chicago bureau, Time magazine ran a story about the school in its education section. The response was unbelievable. A television producer from Los Angeles donated a check for $5,000. Another $2,000 came in from a movie star who wrote that he was sending the money on the advice of his psychiatrist. There was a gust of $10 to $100 checks stapled to letters. In all, the windfall came to nearly $10,000. To me it was like the Irish Sweepstakes. The expansion of the school from eighteen to thirty students had sunk us into a financial hole. Clarence was working more part-time jobs than I could keep track of. We poured all of our savings into the school, ignored the upkeep of our house, and let our life insurance policies lapse. But these contributions enabled me to pay off some bills.

The aftermath of the Time article set the pattern for what would happen every time Westside Prep was featured in the mass media. Teachers wrote me asking my advice on how to teach a child to read or how to get a child to love learning. Some told me of their own frustrations with the educational system and with apathetic colleges who criticized them for being "too optimistic" or ridiculed them for "wasting time caring about students." I also heard from corporate executives who complained about the illiteracy of employees and from college administrators appalled at the poor reading skills of incoming freshmen.

More than 2,000 letters came from parents——frightened, worried parents all calling for help. They told the same kinds of stories I had heard so many times before——only now I was hearing them from people all across the country, not just from black parents living in the inner-city. A mother from California wanted to know what to do for her son, who had been diagnosed in the usual way by his teachers: "hyperactive, brain damaged, bright but a poor achiever, immature, and not properly motivated." There was a letter from a woman in a small Michigan town, saying her teenaged daughter was "a casualty of our failing public school system——an A and B student who can't read and comprehend, think independently and has no clear understanding of our world and how it works."

There were pleas from parents who believed their children were wrongly categorized as retarded or learning disabled. Others wanted to know how they could pull their sons and daughters out of public schools and teach them at home. A St. Louis mother complained that her two boys "entered school open and receptive" but "the school discouraged these qualities." Another woman, from Maryland, said her teenage son was being wasted in a learning disabilities class where all he did was play and paint, doing nothing that could be described as academic all year.

I knew the poor shape education was in, but I had never realized the extent of the public's desperation. One letter, written by a woman from upstate New York, seemed to sum it up:

My son is in first grade. Already he dislikes school, which is causing him to be a discipline problem to his teacher. I know he

does not receive her love to his teacher. I know he does not receive her love and encouragement. His teacher informed me she did not have the time with 28 other active youngsters in her room and besides he is 'too old' for this kind of treatment. It scares me and is tearing me apart. The system is losing him and as a result I am afraid I may also.

People were crying out for help, yet there was so little I could do. What kind of remedy could I offer parents in a letter or a long-distance phone call? Everyone was looking for a cure-all, hoping for some quick-fix for a chronic problem. Parents were so desperate that I sometimes got the feeling they'd buy a snake-oil potion if it promised to turn their children into readers.

Meanwhile, with thirty students my enrollment was nearly up to the limit imposed by the city's building code. I could only accept a handful of new students, squeezing in a few more seats and having some of the four year olds sit on the floor. I wanted to move the school into larger quarters, but I didn't have enough money or a steady enough income from the school to guarantee rent, and many landlords wanted the rent paid months in advance.

Following the Time article, other publications did stories on our school, including educational journals, the Chicago Tribune Magazine, People magazine, and Good Housekeeping. The publicity brought still more parents, teachers, school administrators, and more press filing into my classroom. The director of the Free Schools in Europe read about Westside Prep in the European edition of Time and came all the way from Germany to observe my children.

Over the next two years the children and I were the subjects of articles in newspapers and magazines all over the country. We were also featured on local and national television. I appeared on ABC's Good Morning America, and in November 1979 CBS's 60 Minutes aired a segment on Westside Prep. As a result of the 60 Minutes broadcast I received more than 6,000 letters from desperate parents.

Marva's students reveled in the excitement of being neighborhood celebrities and seeing their pictures in newspapers and magazines. A few of the children had been interviewed by

reporters. One boy gleefully told the class that his relatives in the South had read about the school. And two of the girls told how they had been walking to the playground one day when a woman stopped them on the street to ask:"Aren't you some of those Marva Collins children?"

Marva decided she had better set her students' priorities straight about all the attention they were receiving.

"People are always reading about the bad things that go on in Garfield Park, and it is our obligation to show a different side of our community. Everyone is coming to see you because you're so bright, but we can't afford to go sticking out our chests. We can't get too carried away with this publicity. We can't run around bragging and forget what we are here for, or we'll all end up like a bunch of Petunias. Who remembers the story of Petunia?"

"Petunia was the hen who went around telling all the other barnyard animals she knew how to read when she didn't," Cathy Mullins said. After seven months in the school Cathy had pulled up to reading at her age level. Her nervousness had disappeared, her hair stopped falling out, and she no longer shuddered and whimpered when someone looked at her. She had developed such confidence that months later, when the school year was over, she would take charge of organizing the year-end class party.

"And what happened to Petunia and the rest of the animals?" Marva asked.

"They all got blown up and ended up in the hospital or walking around on crutches," George answered. "'Cause when the mailman brought a package to the barnyard, the other animals asked Petunia to read what was in it. And since she really didn't know how to read, she pretended it said candy."

"What did the package really have in it?"

"Explosives," the children chortled.

"Now we're not going to be Petunias sticking out our chests and bragging about how much we know, not without putting in the effort to learn it," said Marva. "Your picture appearing in the paper today is not going to make you happy for the rest of your life. Getting your picture in the paper or in every magazine in this country is not going

to pay your bills. It's not going to put food on your table or keep you warm in the winter. People are impressed by what you have learned so far, but that doesn't mean you can sit back and congratulate yourselves and do nothing. The more successful a person becomes, the harder he or she has to work to stay there. Let's not worry about what people write about us. Let's just worry about getting things right ourselves."

Things settled back to a kind of normalcy, and in the weeks that followed, the children attended to their work. Marva raced and bounced around the classroom, and everyone tried their best to ignore the visitors who filed into the room and sat on the folding chairs in the back corner. When the children gave in to their curiosity and turned their heads to stare at a stranger or look over a reporter's shoulder as he was jotting notes, Marva quickly reminded them what they were in school for.

"You won't know that man ten years from now," she'd say. "His name isn't going to be on your paycheck." Her caveat was enough to spring all eyes face front. Never mind that their ministers were forever telling them "God will provide." Marva had taught them her own corollary: God will provide if you first have the brain to provide for yourself.

My children were drawing on everything they learned. One Monday morning twelve-year-old Renee Williams came to class with an observation inspired the previous day at church.

"Mrs. Collins," she said. "You know how Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount said,' I come to fulfill you, not harm you'? Well, I bet that's where Shakespeare got the idea for the line' I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.'"

During a discussion of Euripides' tragedy Andromache I asked them how they thought the heroine felt when she went from being a queen to being a slave.

"She probably wanted to kill herself like Cleopatra did," Cindy said.

"And when a person kills himself, what is that called?"I asked.

"Suicide," the class answered.

"When Orestes killed his mother Clytemnestra, that was matricide," Gary added.

"And when you kill your father, that's patricide," Patrick said taking his cue from Gary.

"So killing infants is infanticide," Erika chimed in.

"Yeah, and killing pests is pesticide," said another voice, followed by a guffaw.

Aside from the children's academic progress there were changes far more subtle. They had a discernible pride not only in their work but in their school as well. The school, they felt, belonged to them and they displayed a proprietary sense about its upkeep. I was determined to instill a we mentality in my students and make them realize the school would only work if all of us stuck together to make it work.

I had told them that everything they tore up or lost would have to be replaced, then tuition would have to go up, and soon only the rich would be able to go to school at Westside Prep. To illustrate my point I brought the utility bills and invoices for school supplies to class. It was a simple but compelling economics lesson. Everything has a cost. As long as they were learning, the investment was well worth it. "See the bill from People's Gas Company? I want that much learning out of you today."

Despite all the attention I was getting from the media, my priority was still my students. Once I entered the classroom the rest of the world didn't exist. My students knew and understood me better than anyone else. They certainly knew me better than the media that was calling me "super teacher" and "miracle worker." I hated those epithets. I resented the way they made it all sound so easy.

There was no miracle or magic in what went on in our school. If it were that simple, then teaching would not have been such hard work for me, and learning would not have been so demanding for the children. It was because of all the effort and difficulty that the children savored every accomplishment. And once they started to succeed they wanted to succeed even more. They didn't ever want to turn around again.

Before the 1977-1978 school year was over George and Laura were both accepted by high schools, and Cindy and Erika won commendations in a statewide student writing contest. Both had written essays on the subject of violence, drawing upon the Iliad to make the point that violence has always been around. They were invited by the Illinois State Superintendent of Schools to read their papers at the Illinois Young Authors Conference.

Sitting in the auditorium as the girls presented their papers, I kept picturing Erika as she had been nearly three years before. The same child who had been called retarded was now expressing her thoughts before an audience.

Like every teacher I had days when I was impatient with my students' progress. There were times when I could not seem to break through to a child. And there were some lessons that fell on deaf ears no matter how much I banged on desks or waved my arms to get the point across. Yet I made certain that I never underestimated by children's intelligence or their ability to learn. I kept in mind the countless schools across the country that mislabeled children, simplified textbooks, diluted curricula, and created special curricula for "underprivileged" children. How many are victimized by an educational philosophy which presupposes that background and environment limit a child's capacity to learn? How many children are discouraged from pursuing an education because teachers have taken it upon themselves to judge who can achieve and who cannot? I wasn't there to judge my students. My job as a teacher was to get their talents working. And that's what I tried to do.

The following year the school had a waiting list of several hundred students. Otherwise life at Westside Prep continued much the same. New students replaced those who left, and like their predecessors these children had to be brought up to level. Some of them were real hellions. One boy, Derrin, couldn't sit next to someone without kicking him. After a while, as their brains began to click, the children's hands and feet became still. Order seems to evolve naturally once children realize why they are in school. Six months after Derrin came to the school, a reporter who was talking

to him a bit too long heard the boy say, “I don’t mean to be rude, but you are taking away my skills.”

The children who had been with me for several years were like sponges soaking up everything I could give them. Just as I used to drill them, they now began to push me, constantly asking what does this mean and what does that mean. They were fascinated with words, and they hunted through the dictionary for the sheer joy of finding polysyllabic words to try out on one another.

The great books were their greatest teacher. While there are critics who claim the classics are too difficult for younger students to read—that an eleven year old, for example, can’t understand something as complicated as The Brothers Karamazov—I have found that great literature not only teaches students to read but makes them thirsty for more and more knowledge. These books are over the head of the student reader; that is the purpose of reading them. We read to stretch the mind, to seek, to strive, to wonder, and then reread. We discuss the ideas contained in those books with others, and we temper our own thoughts. The great books are great teachers because they demand the attention of the reader. The mundane content of second-rate literature turns students off from reading forever.

However, I did not leave the children to read these books by themselves. They read a chapter aloud each day in class and a chapter each night at home. We went over these books paragraph by paragraph, often line by line, discussing the ideas and following the characters, action, and movement of the story. The literature they read became part of them. The more I worked with them and the older they got, they began to communicate with each other through the things they learned. Their street lingo began to disappear sometimes to be replaced with lines they had read.

To me they were beginning to sound like Rhodes Scholars—even when they were insulting one another. Once when a student told a lie in class, someone said, “Speak the speech trippingly on thy tongue,” and another chimed in, “The false face does hide what the false heart does know.” If a girl was acting too flirty, the other girls would accuse her of acting like the Wife of Bath. One day my son

Patrick had a pimple on his face and his sister Cindy told him he looked like the Summoner in Canterbury Tales. Another time when a rubberband shot across the room, I asked Michael whether he had done it. He said no and blamed it on Phillip, who said, "Et tu, Michael? This was the most unkindest cut of all."

When the 1978-1979 school year ended, several students, including Cathy Mullins, passed into high school, skipping from seventh to ninth grade. Upon finishing fifth grade, Tracy Shanklin was reading two years above her grade level. Erika and Cindy, in fourth grade, were reading high school books.

That year I had sent all my students aged eight and above to be tested independently at a nearby Catholic school. They took the California Achievement Test, Form 18-C, which was valid for students between seventh and ninth grades. Ordinarily only my older students took that test, but I felt it was also a good experience for the children below seventh grade, whose scores were adjusted upward in accordance with their age.

The results of those tests showed that most of the children had made extraordinary improvement in vocabulary, spelling, reading comprehension, and math. In a few instances a student's test score jumped four years after one year at Westside Prep. Not all my students were reading above grade level. Some were still quite far behind. However, all showed significant improvement from where they had been. There were sixth-graders reading at a fourth or fifth grade level, but those students had started the year struggling with second and third grade material. They had made wonderful progress. I was pleased.

The Catholic school admissions director, Harvey Gross, who administered the California Achievement Test to students from more than seventy Chicago area schools, noted that Marva's Westside Prep students scored higher and showed greater progress than any other group he tested. Yet he was quick to say that test scores alone didn't tell the whole story. One had to watch Marva's students in the classroom to see the full effect of her energy and her conviction that children can learn.

Chapter 15.

The one question that ought to be asked on a teaching application is: do you love children? To me that's the most important criterion for a teacher, more important than credentials or college degrees. A devotion to children was the quality I looked for in all the people who applied for teaching jobs at Westside Prep. Often I didn't sense it in the most seasoned teachers, long-time veterans of public, private, or parochial schools. Others without any formal training or teaching experience sometimes struck me as having the personality and enthusiasm that made an effective teacher: one of those was Lillian Vaughn, a CETA (Comprehensive Employment Training Act) worker placed with me for training by the Alternative Schools Network.

At the time I was anxious to have an assistant to help me with the four and five year olds, who naturally worked at a slower pace than the older students. The job was made to order for Mrs. Vaughn. A short, quiet, rather shy woman of thirty-eight, she was eager to work with the children, which was reason enough for me to try her out. It didn't matter that Mrs. Vaughn had only had a year of college or that her only previous experience was as a teacher's aide, going from school to school to assist in the administering of standardized tests. It was all the better. There would be no bad habits to contend with, no professional ego to bruise.

Lillian Vaughn seemed to love children; she was gentle and patient with them. Further she was receptive to learning my methods without balking at being shown what to do. The first thing I told Mrs. Vaughn was to get a pair of comfortable shoes.

"To be a good teacher you need a comfortable pair of shoes and a strong pair of legs to get you through the day. No teacher sits in this school, you have to walk around to each and every child, not just the ones in the front seats. You have to check for errors in the back as well. Remember, children only want to finish their work. They couldn't care less whether they get it right. They don't want to

be bothered. They will tell you they understand when they really don't."

I gave Mrs. Vaughn explicit directions that every child had to be praised, hugged and touched each day. Slower children needed to be praised for something daily just as much as the brighter child. I told her to think of something positive to say before going over a child's errors. Then I started Mrs. Vaughn the same way I started with any new student, teaching her the phonics drills. I gave her guidelines on how to draw morals and analogies from fables, fairy tales, and poetry. I wrote out elaborate lesson plans and then led her through each step from beginning to end.

The first few months Mrs. Vaughn stayed in the classroom with me, following my moves and tutoring the children. I watched her like a hawk, the same way I watched my students. Once when she was reading a fairy tale to the little children, I heard four-year-old Andy cry and say he was afraid of the witch in the story. Mrs. Vaughn told him not to act like a silly baby.

I left the reading group I was working with and called her aside. "Never make children feel that their fears or questions are silly," I told her. "The fears are real to them. And try not to embarrass a child in front of the other children. They don't like to be ridiculed in front of others any more than we do."

"But I never meant to embarrass him." she apologized.

"I'm sure you didn't, but we have to be conscious of everything we say to children. You have to make yourself aware of how they might interpret something that we say very innocently."

Another time Jimmy Tucker and Donald Ellis were fighting over a pencil and I overheard Mrs. Vaughn tell them she was going to send notes home to their mothers. I interceded. First I scolded the boys, "Don't go on about 'This is mine and this is yours.' If you spend your time learning instead of fighting over a pencil, then someday you'll each be able to own your own pencil factories."

Later I explained to Mrs. Vaughn that as a teacher she had to take care of problems herself. "Remember, if you take the problems to the parent, you and the child will not learn to trust each other and

work together. Children respect teachers who do not always send notes home to parents."

I went on for weeks overseeing everything Mrs. Vaughn said and did. I stressed that phonics had to be taught daily; no religious fervor for just one day. When I felt she wasn't putting enough expression into the reading of a story, I urged her not to be afraid to become a good actress. A teacher must excite the students about learning.

After a while I felt that Mrs. Vaughn was ready to take charge of the youngest group, the pre-schoolers and kindergarteners. I set up space for her class in what had been the living room of the second-floor apartment, down the hall from my classroom. There were no desks and chairs. The youngsters sat on the carpet, surrounded by piles of books and papers, and Mrs. Vaughn kneeled beside them, inching from child to child, helping each to print the upper and lower case letters and to sound out words.

"You have to get down to a child's eye level and talk directly to that child," I insisted, As tall as I was, I was forever stooping and bending down when I talked to a student. "Children, especially the little ones, are easily intimidated by someone towering above them and speaking from on high."

Teacher training was a new area for me. The simplest part was explaining my curriculum. It was far more difficult to show someone how to understand children, how to be sensitive to their needs. Just as a teacher knows his or her own family members, he or she must know the students, their needs and their interests. Each child is unique.

My methods were a far cry from those endorsed in most teacher training institutions, where the emphasis is mostly on abstract theory and professional jargon. To this day I don't understand how hearing about "learning interference due to retroactive and proactive inhibition" will ever help a teacher get through to the freckle-nosed boy with the crooked teeth and make him feel confident and motivated, Many teachers who are honestly looking for ways to improve their techniques walk away from the in-service training sessions overwhelmed with information but without any answers. It's

like asking directions to the bus stop and getting a lecture on mass transit systems.

The fancy dressing of "education-speak" has even spread to job titles. Every profession has its lexicon of fancy job descriptions, and education is no exception. There are curriculum facilitators, master teachers, test administrators, LMC (Learning Materials Center) supervisors, TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) instructors, LD (learning disability) specialists, and EMH (Educable Mentally Handicapped) coordinators. The serous side of it is that while everyone is closely guarding his or her own title, the children are left to fend for themselves.

When teachers turn to the education experts for help, they rarely seem to offer any practical advice. The experts are busy trying to build professional reputations based on some new gimmick. Each has had its fling: new math, teaching machines, continuous progress and non-graded classrooms, open classrooms, team teaching, core curriculum, back-to-basics, black English, and bilingual instruction. One school superintendent had his local community declare an annual "Teachers Day" to improve teacher morale and enthusiasm. What about student morale and enthusiasm? Another superintendent's favorite gimmick was getting businesses to sponsor schools.

That is typical of the American approach to problem-solving. People seem to think that if they throw a few more dollars at a problem it will go away. It is like putting a band-aid on a hemorrhage. When the Chicago public schools were in the throes of a financial crisis, the Chicago School Finance Authority, charged with overseeing school funds and expenditures, hired a consulting firm to make a $33,000 study on cost-saving recommendations. Then, the next year, after the school board failed to do anything about the recommendations, the city allocated another $200,000 for a second study on how to cut school costs.

I remember a time, years back, when schools and teachers tried to deal with their own problems. Then federal dollars became available and suddenly everyone had a problem he couldn't solve and was writing grant proposals. People got billions of dollars to

study problems, and when those studies didn't work out, people got more government money to do a new study to find out what went wrong with the first one.

Countless studies have been done on how to teach inner-city students. To me it seems perfectly plain that inner-city children should be taught the same way other children are taught, because all children want the same things out of life. A ghetto child learns in the same way as any other child and is equally capable of reading Dante, Homer, Pascal, or Chaucer. A child—any child—may not go on to college or become a great scholar, but there is no reason he or she can't gain some appreciation for literature or get something worthwhile out of discussing the great books.

I don't hold with a "ghetto approach" to teaching. The experts claim that correcting an inner-city child's grammar will damage his or her identity. I believe that not correcting grammar will damage that child's whole life. While others lowered their standards for inner-city students, I made mine higher.

Busing is another example of a self-defeating approach to black education. It only makes minority children ashamed of themselves and their neighborhoods, as though only schools in white neighborhoods can teach. My goal is to make my students proud and to involve them in improving their community.

Busing doesn't accomplish anything useful. It is merely another way of side-stepping the real problem—ineffective teachers are everywhere. Statistics clearly show that many white, middle-class children are graduating as functional illiterates. In 1976 a Hudson Institute study reported that the most precipitous decline in student achievement was among the brightest and most advantaged children —those from middleclass families. Miseducation is not a function of a child's race or neighborhood but of the teaching methods he or she is exposed to from kindergarten on.

New methods and theories are not the solution. In fact they have been the primary cause of miseducation. In the mid-1960s many educators supported a trend away from the use of books towards "experiential learning activities." They said students needed to experience concepts and ideas instead of just reading about

them. One educational psychology textbook used in teacher training courses stated: "Today's schools probably depend far too much upon reading as a data gathering technique." Why then were educators surprised when students went all the way through school without being able to read? And why was everyone surprised when those same non-readers became teachers themselves and spawned a whole new crop of miseducated students?

No amount of money or theory or gimmickry will cure what is wrong with education. Teachers need to stop looking for excuses and teach. They have to read and prepare and learn what they do not know, and then they have to bring that knowledge to their students, taking as much time as necessary to make sure every child learns. Any teacher who leaves a child as she found him negates her duty as a teacher.

I trained Mrs. Vaughn and eventually other teachers by giving them the same advice I gave my students. "You can't weep or talk your way through a mess," I said. "When you come up against a problem, you have to work your way through it."

Ella McCoy came to the school for a few days as a parent volunteer, helping to answer the phone and sort the mail. She ended up staying on as a teacher, becoming Marva's protégée. She quit her job after six years of teaching in the public schools. The last straw was overhearing the principal call to a student, "Hey, you fool, come here!"

Having witnessed the transformation of her daughter Erika from a six year old who had been considered retarded to a ten year old who read twenty-three books over the summer, including Tale of Two Cities and Jane Eyre, Ella resolved to stick with Marva to repay that debt, She wanted to give other children the same hope that had been given to her child.

Ella did not know where to begin. Although she had graduated from a Midwestern teachers' college, she did not know how to syllabicate words. She knew nothing about literature or poetry. Like any one of Marva's students and like Lillian Vaughn, Ella needed to start out with the basics—the phonics, the drills and memorization, the vocabulary, the spelling and grammar rules. She studied the

fables, mythology, and classics as though she were cramming for an introductory course in English Lit.

Ella trained in the classroom with Marva, trying to help with the children. "I couldn't really help them," she confessed later, "because I didn't know the material myself." When the school day was over, Ella became Marva's pupil. Marva taught her when a vowel sound was long and when it was short, when to double a consonant and when not to. Before, if had all been a matter of guesswork for Ella; she had never had a method for determining whether the word was hoping or hopping.

More than the fundamentals of language, Ella felt she was learning how to teach for the first time—how to motivate children and get them going. "Everything works when the teacher works," Marva told her. "It's as easy as that, and as hard. It's your duty to find a way to reach each child. If the child doesn't move, it's the teacher's fault."

Ella watched Marva and did what she did, Ella praised the children, patted them, scolded them, hugged them, prodded them, joked with them, was firm with them, held their hands, and pumped them full of confidence and love. Her rapport with the children came naturally. All she could think about was reading and studying and finding ways to move each child. She had never realized teaching was so demanding.

"Each teacher must prepare, prepare, prepare, and prepare some more," Marva had told her. "We never assign to children what we do not understand ourselves. Never assign children books that you haven't read. Remember, written book reports are often copied. The child copies the front of the book, the middle, and the end. Have the child describe the book orally, and be ready for the child to test you to see if you have read the book."

Because she had not read many of the classics herself, Ella became a steady customer at the library. Marva encouraged her to "look through old anthologies, the kind that kept children interested in school before the publishers watered them down and choked so many children on boredom."

After the first day she taught on her own, taking over half of Lillian Vaughn's class, Ella was exhausted. Her legs weren't used to walking up and down all day. However, she knew she couldn't be a teacher at Westside Prep and sit behind a desk, wondering what the child in the back was doing. She had to get up and see for herself. In Marva's school errors had to be checked immediately or a child would fall behind. Ella found energy she never thought she had and she trusted her legs would get stronger and the ache in her lower back would eventually go away. The children needed her full attention now.

A new student, Arnold Rogers, reminded Ella of Erika as she had been before. The child's previous teachers had disposed of him as a lost cause at eight years old. If ever there was a child who had been trampled by armies of specialists clashing over diagnoses, it was Arnold. He had gone through the educational system like a lab rat in a maze, scrutinized by psychologists, audiologists, ophthalmologists, speech pathologists, and social workers. Arnold did have a physiological problem: surgical correction of a cleft palate had left him with speech and hearing difficulties. No one was certain whether these difficulties prevented Arnold from learning.

His principal and teachers saw Arnold merely as a child with "severe behavior disorders." And they wanted him placed in a special school for emotionally disturbed and retarded youngsters. When a psychologist from the Chicago Board of Education examined Arnold, he kept asking her, "Why are you so obese?" The psychologist later said to his mother, "So many of our black boys end up in jail…"

To his public school teachers Arnold was a clear-cut case, which they had chronicled for months:

11/10/78 Playing with cough drops. Passing them all around to classmates instead of doing seatwork.

When told his work was not finished he scribbled everything black.

Grabbed Michael Lane in lunch line and tried to lift him up.

Put his lunch tray in Michael Lane's face. Playing with spider ring of Derrick's.

During math, Arnold was imitating everything I said. He was playing with his pencil and flipped it onto the floor.

Pushing Beverly's desk back.

11/14/78 Arnold began his A.M. work with little difficulty. He did come up to ask me words 3 times, however.

11/15/78 While walking to lunch, Arnold stopped at water fountain and turned on faucet.

2:30 P.M.—Pushed down all the boys in line while standing at the door, for no apparent reason.

2/16/79 During Black History assembly, Arnold seemed confused as to where he was to stand and what he was supposed to say. While on stage, he was looking around—somewhat detached and disinterested in the program.

Note that Arnold needs constant reminding to complete one entire task. During a regular class day he must be spoken to often.

2/21/79 During assembly program, Arnold was holding his hands over his ears. When asked whether the music was too loud—said yes, Several times got out of seat to walk away. Had to be reminded to sit quietly.

3/26/79 Arnold had 2 hours to do three papers. He played with his ink pen and ball for those 2 hrs. instead of working.

Miriam Rogers didn't care what kind of "evidence" the teachers had against her son. She was determined to prove he did not have a behavior disorder. She couldn't understand how a teacher could allow a child to dawdle at his desk for two hours playing with a ball. Why didn't the teacher simply take the ball away and tell Arnold to get busy? As Arnold's father told the principal: "My son understands what you are trying to do to him. He is not crazy, but you are trying to make him crazy."

Arnold's parents got a lawyer from the Legal Assistance Foundation to fight having their son placed in a special school for emotionally disturbed children. They argued their case before representatives from the Board of Education at a special due-process hearing. They won. The hearings officer ruled that there was insufficient proof of a behavior disorder, although there was ample evidence that Arnold had "serous learning disabilities in the areas of

visual-motor perception, visual processing and eye-hand coordination."

Arnold remained in school with the same teacher and received speech and visual therapy from the school clinician. Two months after the hearing there were problems once again. Arnold was suspended for throwing food and fighting in the lunchroom. Having had her fill of the public schools, Miriam Rogers tried to enroll Arnold in Westside Prep.

Marva was out of town. Ella, who had been working at the school for seven months, met privately with Mrs. Rogers and surprised her by showing little interest in Arnold's history of misbehavior: "As far as I'm concerned, your son is an eight-year-old child who will learn." When Marva telephoned, Ella said, "Please, Mrs. Collins, let's squeeze Arnold in. We'll find the space somehow." With only three weeks left before the school closed for the summer, Marva agreed to take Arnold until the end of the term without any fee.

Marva met Arnold and his mother at the door, "Why were you suspended from your other school?"

"For fighting and throwing food." His mother spoke for him. Arnold was too ashamed of his speech impediment to attempt more than a one-word answer to any question.

Marva nodded. "Arnold, sweetheart, you already know how to fight. If you want to spend your time throwing around food and garbage, if you want to be a garbageman all your life, then you don't need an education."

"Huh?" Arnold looked up at Marva, confused.

"I beg your pardon. We don't say 'huh' in here. We speak in sentences." Marva kneeled next to him, her eyes level with his, her hands on his shoulders. "Your mother can't be with you your whole life and neither can I. You must make it on your own. Love, you are going to learn in here every day starting today."

Arnold stared in amazement.

"Now, sweetheart, can you spell cat for me?" Marva asked.

"C-a-t," he answered hesitantly.

“Very, very good. You’re so bright,” Marva said. Then she turned to Mrs. Rogers. “There is nothing wrong with your son that time and patience can’t take care of.”

Arnold became one of Ella’s students. She sat him down and said, “Arnold, sweetheart, from now on you’re going to learn. Children don’t fail in here because I don’t let them fail, You will learn to read so you can have choices in life.”

The other children were reading Aesop’s Fables. Arnold refused to open the book. He bolted out of his seat and into the bathroom where Cindy and Tracy were sitting on the edge of the bathtub reading. Cindy looked up from her book. “Do you want to use the bathroom?” she asked.

He shook his head. He spied a hammer that Clarence had left on the floor beside the toilet. He grabbed it and took a swing at Cindy, hitting her on her arm. She screamed and ran out of the room with Arnold chasing after her.

“I’ll take that hammer, Arnold,” Marva said. What surprised Arnold even more than the suddenness of her appearance was her tone. She spoke calmly and softly, yet something told him she meant business. He shoved the hammer at her and started to turn away. Marva held him by his arm while she consoled Cindy and checked for injuries. Satisfied that Cindy wasn’t hurt, Marva turned back to Arnold. “In this school we put our energy in our brains, not our fists and certainly not in hitting others with hammers or sticks or anything else.”

Arnold raised his head to look at her, wondering if she was crazy.

“This is your last school, darling.” She continued. “You are here to stay. No one is putting you out. But you are going to produce, you are going to read, because if you can’t read, then you can’t do anything in life.” She tucked in his shirt and started to walk him back to Ella’s classroom. “I know there’s a good you locked up inside that angry you. It’s just waiting to come out if you will only let it.”

“There once was a famous sculptor named Michelangelo. Do you know what a sculptor is?” Arnold shook his head without lifting his eyes. “Well, a sculptor is someone who carves and chisels

statues out of blocks of wood or stone. Michelangelo liked to make things out of marble. And he would walk around the streets of Florence, Italy, where he lived, and every time he saw a piece of marble he would think of the beautiful angels he could carve from it. Just as Michelangelo thought there was an angel locked inside every piece of marble, I think there is a brilliant child locked inside every student in this school."

Marva sat Arnold down at his spot in the second classroom. Ella was giving dictation. Ella paused and held his shoulder: "You can do it. You can do it." She printed his name at the top of a paper and wrote out the last sentence of dictation; Aesop wrote fables. Taking Arnold's chin in her hand, she said, "Now let's say the first word together. The a is silent so we begin with the e sound. Say ee. You have to open your mouth in a smile."

Arnold repeated the vowel.

"Oh. that's good. Now sss, make the sound come through your teeth. Then ah, open your mouth wide. And puh, make a popping sound with your lips. Now put all the sounds together and say Aesop."

"Aesop," Arnold said.

"Very good. Aesop, Aesop." Ella repeated.

"I know it's Aesop. How many times ya gonna tell me? Wads duh nex'word?"

Ella laughed and mussed his hair. "You're going to do just fine."

Marva was watching this scene from a distance, looking on with pride in both the child and the teacher.

At the end of the first day Ella sent Arnold home with a sheet of math problems for homework. She didn't expect him to do them all. If he did one, it would have been something. But he finished the page. By the end of the week Arnold was starting to read. He was taking dictation and writing on the lines of the paper, which he had never done before. He came in scrubbed and with his shirt tucked in. Once he discovered that no one made fun of the way he talked, he began to answer questions and read aloud—drawing cheers and applause from his classmates.

His mother didn't know what to make of it. Arnold had always been such a frustrated and angry child. He used to say he couldn't wait until he got to be sixteen years old so he could drop out of school. Now he woke up in the morning excited about going to class, telling his father to drive faster. He didn't mind staying late in the afternoon to finish work. Sometimes Ella would drive him home and stop for a hotdog or milkshake. He looked forward to Ella's tutoring him over the summer; as he told his mother, "I got to learn 'cause I'm going to go to college and do a lot of things when I grow up."

One morning the bubble burst. Arnold came to school upset. The sparkle was gone, replaced by his old belligerence.

"What happened, baby?" Marva asked.

Arnold told her he forgot his homework and his father had yelled at him in the car for it.

"Who runs this school, your dad or Mrs. Collins?" Arnold had never seen her so angry—not even the time he hit Cindy with the hammer.

"Mrs. Collins," he answered.

"That's right. And you know what we say in here: if you can't make a mistake, you can't what?"

"Make anything."

"Good. Now get a smile on that face. I can't stand to be around sad children."

That afternoon, Marva telephoned Arnold's father. "Mrs. McCoy and I are trying so hard to build confidence in Arnold," she told him, "but by shouting at the boy you are going to undo everything we have done so far. Arnold has been called every name in the book and now he needs praise and plenty of if—from everyone."

A few days later came the end of another school year. It had been five years since Marva left Delano to begin an alternative school. The students who had first come to her as ornery, scared, bored, underachieving children were now stepping into adolescence as confident and determined young men and women. Erika left for the summer handing Marva a copy of a newly published biography of Sacajawea. "Mrs. Collins, you've got to read this book. It's terrific."

Gary Love said his last goodbyes to Marva and Westside Prep. Gary, who used to insist he couldn't do anything, had won a scholarship to a private academy in the northern suburbs. Marva's son Patrick was also going to high school in the fall.

There were other changes afoot for September, Clarence was leaving his job at Sunbeam to help Marva manage the school's business affairs. Westside Prep had grown into a fullfledged educational institution, and Marva was finally moving it out of her house. The 60 Minutes feature had opened a financial spigot that allowed her to make plans for accommodating some of the children on the waiting list, which had swelled to about 700 students. Almost $50,000 in contributions had rolled into Westside Prep, including a $10,000 check from an anonymous donor whom Marva jokingly called J. Beausfoot Tipton from the TV series The Millionaire. Another $75,000 came from a film production company that bought the rights to make a movie about Marva and the school. The contributions, the movie money, plus the income from her workshops and speeches enabled Marva to rent space on the second floor of the old, and practically vacant, National Bank of Commerce Building, a few blocks away on Madison Street.

In September 1980 Westside Prep would have an enrollment of 200 students. Marva had said all along that Westside Prep was not the "one-room fairy tale" some of the press had labeled it. She was going to prove that good education could happen on any scale.

Chapter 16.

I had dreamed of expanding the school for nearly three years, ever since I had to draw up that first waiting list with thirty names. Yet when it finally came about, the expansion happened so fast I felt as though I were whirling on a merry-go-round and couldn't catch my breath. The school didn't just grow. It seemed to explode. We jumped from 34 students in June to an estimated fall enrollment of 200, with a waiting list of over 500 more.

The summer was chaos. Everyone was swept up in moving the school. Clarence, Eric, and Patrick worked frantically, painting, building bookshelves, hanging blackboards, and carrying all the desks, books, and filing cabinets from the upstairs of our house to the second floor of the bank building. Cindy, Tracy, and Erika unpacked cartons of new textbooks and supplies. Ella, Mrs. Vaughn, and I made class lists, wrote up lessons, mimeographed worksheets, arranged desks, and put up posters and phonics charts. Some of the parents pitched in too, helping out with registration, phone calls, and office work.

Expansion on this scale made it necessary that I do something about the other sort of parents, those who remained uninvolved in the education of their children, to the point of never paying tuition. One father seemed to typify their attitude when he said, "I know you won't put my child out if I don't pay tuition. You like children too much." I flatly informed the parents we would have to change that policy in the fall. Tuition was the only reliable source of income for the school. I couldn't count on contributions and lecture fees to pay the monthly rent or salaries for my staff. The parents agreed to form an association to deal with delinquent tuition and to do some fund raising.

My chief concern that summer was hiring and training new teachers. Ella and Mrs. Vaughn were working out beautifully, though both needed to develop more initiative in handling student problems. They tended to run to me with everything, from a child who needed

a band-aid for a scratch to a student who was disrupting the class, but they were hard-working, dedicated teachers. Most important, they believed in the children. I wanted to find two other teachers just like them.

I had a stack of resumes from people all over the country, even a few inquiries from Europe. Resumes and letters couldn't tell me what I wanted to know. I was interested in attitudes, not credentials. I didn't want people who pitied poor little black children. Nor did I want teachers who had limited expectations of what children could achieve.

Since August had to be set aside for training new teachers, I didn't have time to go through a long interviewing process. Fortunately I didn't have to. I hired one teacher, Patricia Jurgens, on a referral and recommendation from a friend of mine. The other teacher I decided on was Marcella Winters, the mother of one of my students. She had gone back to school and had just completed her degree in education. I knew and liked her as a person before I ever knew her as a teacher. She was outgoing and high spirited, a bundle of energy. The main reason I hired her was that she had an interest in the school and believed in what we were doing. Her daughter had been enrolled in Westside Prep for two years.

I drilled the new teachers in my methodology. "The teacher who can only work with the well-motivated child and the well-behaved child has no place at Westside Preparatory School." I told them. "I want teachers who will make the slow student become good and the good student become superior."

A wig emporium and a Frederick's of Hollywood-style lingerie shop flanked the entrance to Marva's new school in the National Bank of Commerce Building. In the lobby an elderly security guard sat at his post by the iron-gated doorway to the empty bank. The bank had closed nearly twenty years ago, when everything else in Garfield Park shut down.

The building's only tenant was Westside Prep, installed in the mezzanine overlooking the unused teller cages. Marva paid $2,400 a month to rent the windowless, musty space that was too hot in the

fall and spring and too cold in the winter. It was a stiff price, but that was a fact of life in that neighborhood.

By 2:30 in the afternoon, when the children filed out of school, hawkers had set up their wares on card tables in the outer vestibule, hustling parents to buy rhinestone rings and gold-plated chains. Outside, car exhaust mixed with the smells from the fried chicken franchise across the street, and customers were already seeking out the taverns around the corner.

It was an improbable setting for a school, perhaps even more improbable than the apartment above Marva's house. Yet Westside Prep was drawing students from all parts of the city and even from Chicago's western and far-southern suburbs. Many parents now felt that the only place their children could get a high-quality education was in the heart of a ghetto.

One student commuted by train from Elgin, Illinois, thirty-five miles away. Eighth-grader Sandra Parsons—a former junior high school student who performed at a fourth grade level in both reading and math—made the daily sixty-mile round trip from East Chicago, Indiana. And nine-year-old Brian Shoemaker came from the Lincoln Park area, a neighborhood of lakefront condominiums and $250,000 Victorian rowhouses, whose residents included the likes of Governor James Thompson. Brian had attended the Lincoln School, one of the highest rated of the city's public schools, where he had been a fourth grader reading at a first grade level.

Westside Prep's 200 students were divided among five classes. Some classes had more than forty pupils----ten to fifteen more than the Chicago Teachers' Union allowed in the public schools. Lillian Vaughn, Patricia Jurgens, and Marcella Winters took charge of the pte-schoolers, kindergarteners, and firstgraders---about half of the school's enrollment. Most of these younger children did not have any difficulty learning; their parents were sending them to Westside Prep in the hope that they never would. The few who had problems had drastic ones. Mrs. Vaughn had a six-year-old student who showed signs of being autistic. According to his grandfather. Who raised him, Charles had never talked. All he did was grunt.

Marva and Ella taught the older students, the hard-core problem children. Besides not having academic skills, some of these youngsters had enough emotional disorders to fill the glossary of a psychology textbook. One boy had been in and out of thirteen schools in four years. Another youngster, who had a penchant for stabbing other children with pencils, had been thrown out of the Drusso Mental Health Center. Then there was "The Slasher," an eight year old who would remove the blade from pencil sharpeners and run around cutting up his classmates' coats, hats, gloves, and scarves.

Tommy, at twelve, was in a constant depression, hating himself, hating his brother, hating everyone for not liking him; he even hated his last name, which he refused to use. The word kill nearly always came up when he spoke. If Marva said, "How do you feel today?" Tommy would say, "I feel like killing myself." When Marva said, "Have a nice weekend," he'd answer, "If I don't kill myself falling off my bike" or "If I don't kill myself getting hit in the head with a soccer ball."

Marva kept a straight face and praised him, saying he was handsome or she liked something he was wearing. She believed that he was not really self-destructive; he wanted attention. Marva resolved to show him there were more positive ways of getting it. Their exchanges began to sound like a cross between a Burns and Allen sketch and Waiting for Godot.

"I don't like myself. I want to kill myself."

"My, what a beautiful shirt you have."

Tommy would shrug and try again." My brother hates me. I'd like to kill myself."

"Oh, what lovely eyes you have." Marva replied.

It went on for months. Then one afternoon Marva wished him a good evening.

"I…" Tommy paused.

What was it going to be this time? Marva wondered.

"I… I love you. Mrs.Collins." Tommy shouted, throwing his arms around her in a bearhug.

That first breakthrough was a joy to me, but it was only a beginning. Tommy inched into learning, still elusive, still testing and feeling his way. He spent part of the day in Ella's class, working on phonics and math and then came to mine for social studies and science. During one of the social studies lessons, while the students were taking turns reading aloud, I called on Tommy to read a short passage that I had selected especially for him. It contained eleven words that I was sure he could sound out. As he read, I stood beside him squeezing his shoulder. And when he finished, the whole class applauded.

"I gotta see Mrs.McCoy. Can I go see Mrs.McCoy?" he said excitedly, already half-standing. When I gave the okay, he bounded out the door and rushed into Ella's room. "I knocked 'em dead in Mrs. Collins' class. I sure knocked 'em dead!"

Seeing Westside Prep's wunderkinden splashed across the TV screen and featured in newspapers and magazines led some skeptics to accuse me of hand-picking only the brightest students. They saw only how far the children had come, not where they had been.

In a way I did hand-pick the students. Often the severity of a child's problem speeded up admission to Westside Prep. An older student took precedence over a pre-schooler or kindergartener for two reasons. First, the older child needed more immediate attention, sometimes having only four or five months to develop his or her skills to qualify for high school. Second, the pre-school and kindergarten enrollment had ballooned, and I didn't want my teachers to have more students than they felt they could handle.

Sometimes I gave priority to a child who wasn't even on the waiting list, and that selection policy brought on a barrage of complaints from parents who had long-standing applications on file. I also drew fire from some parents and members of the black community when I accepted some white students to Westside Prep. I tried to be fair, but I couldn't please everyone. It was up to me to make the decision on each new enrollment.

It was my school and I felt the public had no right to tell me how to run it. That especially meant government bureaucrats and special interest groups pushing minority rights. I live in the middle of

Garfield Park, they do not. They do not know what works here, I do. People who have never set foot in this neighborhood always seem to think they know exactly what is good for it. All the do-gooders come in and criticize what is wrong. But do they ever come up with better alternatives?

Some people criticized my kind of "tough love," but I did not need any outsiders telling me I was too firm with my students. I felt just as sorry as they did for those children. No one knew better than I what kinds of homes some of them came from. But I was doing something constructive about it. I wasn't just passing out candy, rubbing the children's heads, and telling them how cute they were. I was trying to give them the skills to survive, forever telling them that each person must decide what he or she is going to leave to society for the privilege of living here. It was through the children in my school that I hoped to change the attitude of future generations.

The school itself represented the kind of determination, perseverance, stick-to-it-iveness, and pride I wanted the children to have. Sometimes, as I walked through the classrooms or when I overheard four and five year olds running around saying, "I'm a universal citizen," I was amazed at what we had accomplished in five years.

Westside Preparatory School had come full circle. With an enrollment of 200, operating a school that size became complex and demanding. I suddenly had an enormous overhead, a payroll, and all kinds of administrative duties. I had to deal with the newly formed Parents Association, occasionally being the referee at their meetings. One father simply could not get along with the other parents, and finally I had to ask him to withdraw his two children from the school. Once or twice I even had to put an end to bickering and resentment among my staff—the same kind of dissension as at Delano. I had to remind my teachers that they were not the important ones, that only the children mattered.

The 1980--1981 school year was a period of transition. I found myself pulled in a dozen directions. I had to oversee what my staff was doing, but I couldn't be in every classroom every minute of the day. I had to run the school as a whole, in addition to teaching my

classes, I kept reminding myself that people were sending their children to this school because they wanted the kind of education demonstrated in the one-room school on Adams Street.

Of course the school lost some of the intimacy of a one-room setting, but I made sure I knew every one of the 200 children. I was determined not to lose sight of the philosophy on which the school was founded—we were there to serve the individual needs of each child. I kept telling my teachers that they should be the ones sharpening pencils and washing the blackboards. The children were there to learn, and learning was a full-time job.

I also had to remind my staff that whatever a child should have learned in a previous school didn't matter. Their duty was to start that child up from where he or she was. There were times when I had to caution my teachers not to write a child's name on the board for talking. Most of all I stressed the importance of praise and positive reinforcement.

I didn't want to be a principal. I fought the remoteness of being an administrator. The hours I spent in the classroom teaching were all the more precious because they kept me from losing touch with the children. Yet I had to be a principal. One of the newer teachers proved to be reluctant to follow my methodology, though I hoped she would eventually come around. I was especially anxious not to dismiss her in the middle of the year because children need continuity in their education. Schools have always moved black children around like pawns on a playing board, and I was not going to do that. If the other aspects of their lives were in chaos, then it was up to me give my children the stability they needed. Unfortunately, the teacher did not work out and she left the following year.

By January the school was operating with a certain momentum of its own. For the most part the teachers were carrying on my methods—especially Ella, who had a strong enough personality to take charge when I had to be away. The children themselves were the best indication that the school was working. At eight years old Calvin Graham, who had started at Westside Prep four years before, was reading at a ninth grade level. The older children had adopted

him as a sort of class mascot, and I could barely keep a straight face at some of the things that came out of his mouth. One afternoon I was going around the class asking the children to give me a thought for the day. In turn they recited quotations from Emerson, Shakespeare, and Socrates. When I came to Calvin, he said, "To associate with fools is like going to bed with a razor." Surprised, I told him I wasn't familiar with that line. He said he made it up himself.

Arnold Rogers, the child Ella had worked so closely with, blossomed during that year. His mother said he hated to misss school, even when he was sick. Once he had the stomach flubut refused to stay home. In class he had an unfortunate accident, and when I took him to the washroom, he said to me, "Oh, Mrs. Collins, I'm so chagrined, I'm so humiliated." I told him that any eight-year-old boy who had the word chagrin in his vocabulary had no reason to be humiliated about anything. Several months later that same child, who had struggled to overcome a severe learning disability associated with a speech impediment, stood before an auditorium filled with people and recited the poem "Invictus."

I was proud of all the children. Their accomplishments spoke for themselves. Sandra Parsons, for example, the thirteen year old who had arrived in September doing fourth grade work, tested a few months later at a tenth grade level and was admitted to the freshman class at a private high school in Indiana. Another girl, who came to me in the fall from one of the city's most acclaimed public school, where she was scheduled to repeat seventh grade, scored at a tenth grade level in vocabulary and at an eleventh grade level in reading comprehension when she took the California Achievement Test in January. And in June 1981 Tracy Shanklin, who had started with me six years before, was accepted into a parochial high school —a year above her age level—and was slated for advanced algebra and sophomore biology classes.

Former students of mine were now attending a variety of private, parochial, and public high schools, where most of them were holding their own. Some did only average work. A few had a difficult time adjusting and had to work hard to pull up their grades. Still,

considering all these students had been so far below average when they first came to Westside Prep, the progress they had made was remarkable.

Somehow people have a hard time accepting the fact that inner-city children can achieve on a higher plane than most schools require. It was precisely that myth that I wanted to shatter. With that in mind, I took on children from the Cabrini-Green housing projects in the summer of 1981.

Cabrini-Green is the essence of Chicago's mean streets, a graffiti-scrawled stretch of high-rise public housing where murder, rape, and gang terror are daily events. In March 1981 Cabrini-Green caught nationwide media attention when Mayor Jane Byrne moved into one of the apartments in an effort to curtail the violence and pacify frightened residents.

Trying to keep things cool over the summer, city officials stepped up the police patrols, built a new baseball field to get the children off the streets, and also sponsored a tuition-free Summertime Institute for 140 Cabrini-Green area youngsters, kindergarten through sixth grade.

Mayor Byrne asked Marva to organize the eight-week summer school program. She accepted without hesitation, asking specifically for students who had behavior problems or were reading at least two grades below their age level. This time critics would hardly be able to accuse her of selecting the brightest students.

Marva used the same textbooks and teaching materials she used at her school, not the ones the city school system wanted to provide. She set up the curriculum, prepared the lesson plans, and hired the teachers. There was one catch: her staff had to include five teachers from the public schools, a concession to the Chicago Teachers' Union.

More than two dozen applied. Some of the interviews were brief. One applicant demanded a classroom with windows. Another was dismayed that the Byrd Elementary School, where the program was being held, was not air-conditioned. A third wanted to know how many aides she would have. Others balked when Marva told

them they would not be able to sit behind a desk. Needless to say, those teachers weren't hired.

Organizational details were taken care of the day before the program started, much to the irritation of some teachers who didn't want to show up before the children. Marva refused to waste any class time passing out books and papers. By 8:30 on the first morning Marva and her staff were ready to begin teaching.

Marva was to supervise the seven classrooms. During the first week she spent most of the three-hour daily session with the sixth-graders, the oldest students and the by now chronic non-learners. To see her then was to see the quintessential Marva at work—preacher, flatterer, aphorist, quipster, booster, parent, and teacher.

"Good morning, I love you," Marva greeted the students. "You are all very special students and you are going to learn here . . ." Beginning with an introduction to phonics, she raced excitedly around the room, urging the children to an enthusiasm that matched her own. "Show me a teacher who is dragging," she reminded her staff, "and I'll show you a listless class."

Though it was summer, no one in class was ever allowed to sleep or daydream, "Wait a minute," Marva said, stopping in the middle of an explanation of the vowel reversals in diary and dairy. "Sit up everybody. Sit up and look alive."

One boy was leaning over his desk, his head resting on his arm. Marva went over to him and gently lifted his head. Nudged out of his nap, he angrily pushed Marva away.

"If you touch me again, I'm gonna kill you!"

"Good, I've lived too long anyway." Marva remained calm.

"Why don't you beat him? His teacher last year always hit him with a stick," a child called from across the room.

"Because that is not the way human beings should treat each other. I am a teacher. I wasn't trained to be a jailer or a disciplinarian. School is not a place where we beat people. It's where we go to learn to have a better life. Beating someone doesn't do any good. When you are finished beating someone, how much better off are you? How much richer are you?"

Marva turned back to the boy. "What's your name, darling?"

He didn’t answer.

“Sam, he’s Sam,” a classmate said.

“Now look, Sam,” Marva continued, “you are going to sit up if I have to spray you with cold water. I will not have you drooping and wilting on me. I do not droop and wilt on you. You will learn here. You have no choice.”

Standing beside Sam, her hand on his shoulder, she turned to address the whole class. “Some of you are in sixth grade and you can’t even read at a first grade level. I’m not saying that to put you down. I’m telling you the facts as they are. When you go back to your regular schools in September, you will be the brightest children in your class.”

Marva walked to the front of the room, handing one boy a tissue as she passed him and reminding another to take the pick out of his hair. Pointing to the words she had printed in long lists on the board, Marva explained that the letter e at the end of a word makes a middle vowel long. She recited the words and the children echoed: ”Rod and rode, pin and pine, cut and cute, sit and site, dim and dime, cub and cube, man and mane, kit and kite, mad and made, pal and pale, fin and fine.”

A boy wearing a gold Superman tee-shirt started making faces and laughing and whispering to the child next to him. Both of them giggled. Marva stopped.

“Is it funny when we fail?” she asked. “Is it funny when we have no food? Is it funny when we have no money to go to the doctor?”

Marva glowered at the student who created the distraction. “Is it funny when we haven’t got a dollar?” she repeated. The boy shook his head. “Well, then, stop clowning because this is money up here,” Marva said, pointing to the vowel sounds on the board.

Moving to the second boy, she asked, “Why are you paying attention to him? Don’t grin at him. He’s sad. Get on your knees and pray for him. Children who keep clowning do it because they can’t do anything else.

“Children, you are foolish to spend school time clowning and griming. Teachers come in here wearing nice clothes, and they drive away from here in nice cars. They get all that from you, from the

public paying their salaries. You pay them to teach. If you just sit there grinning and not learning, you are paying them for nothing."

Taking the arm of the boy in the gold tee-shirt, Marva eased him out of his seat. "Now, let's go to the board, and we'll do these vowel sounds together."

Slowly the boy followed, and with Marva helping him he sounded out the list of words. He strutted back to his desk with an air of success.

Marva told the class to open their readers to the story of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter.

"Do we copy the whole story?" asked a girl.

"Copy the story?" Marva was puzzled.

"Sure, we always copy the story and do the questions in the back."

"You don't copy anything from a book. You learn what the book has to teach you. If you are used to copying, you are not used to thinking. You are going to think in here. You are not going to be looking at a picture and filling in a word. You are going to do things that require brains."

Marva gave the children background on the author, telling them that Beatrix Potter grew up in England. "England is in the British Isles. 'England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, four little dogs without any tails,' That's how you remember the British Isles." Continuing, Marva told about the author's lonely childhood, reflected in the point of view of her stories. "And what is point of view? It's the attitude an author shows in a story."

Marva highlighted words to watch, giving the pronunciation and the definition. "Implored means begged. What did I do if I implored you?"

"You begged," the class said in unison.

"Exert. The ex has the sound of eg. The ert sounds like zurt. Exert means to try very hard. What does it mean?"

"To try very hard."

"Oh, you are so smart. Now we are going to read a story about a rabbit who was naughty. What happens to people who do bad things?"

"They come to no good," answered a thin girl wearing a long-sleeved blouse.

"So it is better to stop a bad thing before it gets started, isn't it?" As she spoke, Marva walked over to the girl and began rolling up the sleeves of the child's blouse. Leaning down to her ear, Marva whispered that it was too hot to have on long sleeves.

"I want all eyes on the books. Don't lose your place reading. You will get lost in the world that way."

She called on a child to begin the reading of Peter Rabbit:"Once upon a time…." When he finished the first few sentences, Marva stopped him to check for comprehension. "Who is this story about?" she asked.

"Rabbits," a chubby boy in the front seat answered.

"There are lots of rabbits. What are these rabbits' names?"

"Aw, this story is taking too long," complained a boy as he banged his book shut.

"All year you have been copying a story out. That is why you have problems with reading. I have read this story at least sixty times. I have been using this book for fourteen years. It's easy for me as a teacher to sit behind a desk and ask you to answer the questions at the end. It is much easier than standing here and asking what everything means. If the story is too long, life is too long. How many of you want to die this minute? You need to take time to learn. How many of you would tell me to stop if I were putting $20 bills on your desk? Well, don't tell me to stop teaching you either. Everything I teach you is like money in the bank."

The children read half the story. Sensing their interest flagging, Marva told them to close their readers and take out Bernard Miles' Favorite Tales From Shakespeare. She launched into an introduction to Macbeth.

"The witches predict but people determine," Marva said. "Everyone said, 'Oh, Cabrini-Green,' when I told them I was coming here to teach. They tried to predict something. They tried to predict that I would find trouble here. But you determine. You determine what you are going to be and what you are going to make of

Cabrini-Green. You can be as great as you want to be. And this neighborhood can be as good or as bad as you want it to be."

A child in the back let out a groan. "If you have a headache or a stomachache, go home . No one pays you for aches and pains. People will only pay you to do work."

"Is it almost lunchtime?" blurted another child.

"Are you children worried about getting one free carton of milk and one free sandwich from the city, when I am teaching you so that you can get your own milk and food your whole life?"

Marva stood beside the child who had asked about lunch. "I love you," she told him, "and I am not going to go home and talk about you behind your back. I am going to tell you the way it is right to your face. See the torn shirt you are wearing? Without an education you will always have a torn shirt. I am going to bring you a shirt tomorrow, and I expect you to act like someone who wears good clothes, starting now, Right now."

The class read part of Macbeth, saving the rest for the next day. They went on to work on synonyms. At a quarter of twelve Marva began passing out homework sheets.

"I already got one," said the boy with the Superman shirt, clowning again.

"Do not say 'I already got one.' Say 'I have one.' But don't tell me to stop giving you homework. I asked you before would you tell me to stop giving you money? You know, you are a handsome boy. You don't have to stretch your mouth back like that in a grin. You were born to win, so don't make yourself a loser."

Hearing papers rustling, Marva looked up and saw some of the boys folding their homework and shoving it into their back pockets.

"Don't crumple your papers into little pieces." Marva said. "Big people take their papers home flat. How would it look if some lawyer or executive brought important papers home looking like that? All of you sit down and straighten those papers. You all have such a poor image of yourselves. Be proud of your work. Be proud of what you do."

As the children were leaving the room, Marva intercepted the boy in the Superman shirt. Putting her arms onhis shoulders, she

said. “You are in sixth grade and your reading score is 1.1. I don’t hide your scores in a folder. I tell them to you so you know what you have to do. Now your clowning days are over. You haven’t done a thing to me. You’ve done it to you. If I have to love you more than you love yourself. I’ll do that.”

Marva’s biggest problem at Cabrini-Green was not the children but some of the teachers. Some had no enthusiasm. They watched the clock, let children fall asleep, and acted as though it was killing them to move. One woman quit after four days, telling Marva it was just too difficult: she was too tired and uncomfortable standing all morning. Marva had to replace a second teacher, a woman who claimed to be a reading specialist. As it turned out, she didn’t know a thing about phonics. Marva discovered she was giving her students busy-work instead. On one occasion Marva walked into this woman’s classroom and found her assigning a composition on “My Trip To A Foreign Country.” She expected the students to write about traveling to a foreign country when some of them had never traveled more than a few miles beyond Cabrini-Green. Worse than inappropriate, the topic was boring. It was standard who cares fare, like the traditional “How I Spent My Summer Vacation.”

Marva wasn’t about to let the project fail because of poor teachers, so she brought in reinforcements. Ella McCoy came in to help supervise. Even Erika did some tutoring. She walked up and down the aisles supplying a synonym or an antonym, assisting a younger child to read aloud and offering encouragement. One of the eight-year-old boys said the work was too hard and he couldn’t do it; Erika looked at him sternly and said, “Yes, you can. There isn’t anything you can’t do if you try. You’re the brightest child in the world.”

Over the course of the summer a lot of children dropped out of the Summertime Institute. But by the end of eight weeks the children who had remained in the program improved their skills. They had been given a test of vocabulary, spelling, and reading comprehension at the beginning of the session, and their post-program scores all showed increases. In a matter of weeks some of the students had jumped to readers a grade level higher.

On the last day of the program the assembly hall at Byrd School was crowded with media and city officials as Mayor Byrne presided over the awards ceremony, passing out certificates of achievement to eighty-seven students. Later the press surrounded several children.

"What did you learn?" a TV correspondent asked.

"Norse gods and Greek gods," answered one boy.

"I learned Shakespeare, Macbeth, reading comprehension, and dictation," said another. "Learning was fun."

"I'm going to keep on studying and learning words," eight-year-old Dorian Hudson told a newspaper reporter. And an eleven-year-old girl said, "I want to take some of what I learned back to my own school and teach it to others."

When the reporter asked the girl what her name was, the child answered, "Chatapne Calvin. There is a long mark over the vowel e."

Epilogue

In September 1981, Westside Preparatory School moved into its own permanent facilities—two adjoining one-story brick office buildings that blended in with the factories, warehouses, and storefront churches along Chicago Avenue on the outskirts of Garfield Park. From its fa?ade, no one could tell it was a school. But everyone knew it was there just the same.

It was Marva's school, but it seemed to belong to the whole neighborhood. People saw it as a beacon of hope on the West Side, a stand against the transience and waste that had plagued the area for nearly two decades. And they were proud of it. How many schools in the middle of a ghetto had ever been a model for achievement? In Marva, the children of the neighborhood had someone to look up to who was not a hustler, entertainer, or sports figure. She and Westside Prep were abiding proof that a person didn't have to be a Dr. J. or a Lena Horne to make it.

Not everyone saw her that way. Marva had her share of scoffers and detractors. Most of her critics were within the teaching profession. Her visibility and her incriminations against the educational system understandably made her a prime target. From Albert Shanker, President of the United Federation of Teachers, to

her former colleagues at Delano, critics took issue with Marva and with the "success claims" of her students. They accused Marva of exaggerating her students' accomplishments, of fixing her pupils' test scores, and of raising her school's average test scores by getting rid of poor achievers. There were also charges that she was running an educational sweatshop, and that her students were not learning to read, think, and discuss the great works of literature, but that they were merely memorizing passages by rote.

The more the press and the public extolled Marva, the more vocal her critics became. Both the praise and the criticism built to a crescendo following the airing of a television docudrama about Marva in December 1981. The Marva Collins Story touched off a backlash from some Chicago public school teachers who felt the movie was an affront to them and to public education in general. In defense, they set out to discredit her.

Two months later, a newspaper published by an organization of substitute teachers printed an expose charging that all the publicity surrounding Marva and Westside Prep was the result of a "carefully constructed" five-year "media hoax" that was "aimed at further crippling public education here and around the country." The article alleged that press coverage of Marva's school was not taking the rejects of the public school system but that Westside Prep's student body was made up of middle-class children handpicked for high ability. At the same time, it questioned Marva's acceptance of CETA money when all along she had been an outspoken critic of federal aid.

A few of the local media jumped on the story, attacking Marva with the same hyperbole they had used jin praising her. They went after her personality—depicting her as egotistical vindictive, and quick-tempered—and they began looking for the proverbial skeletons in her closet, treating her as if she were a high-profile politician. In an interview, one newscaster went so far as to ask whether Marva was "a sinister woman." Another columnist, angered by Marva's statements that "money isn't the answer to educational problems" and by her endorsement of publicly funded tuition vouchers, accused

Marva of "playing into the hands of the right wing" and allowing herself to be used by politicians to support school funding cuts.

Two radio and television reporters hit the hardest with a litany of allegations. Quoting a handful of disgruntled parents and a former Westside Prep teacher, they contended that Marva had misrepresented her credentials; that she had plagiarized another educator's ideas for an opinion column she wrote for the Sun-Times; that Westside Prep teachers mistreated students; that Marva refused to release her students' test scores for verification; and that she pressured parents had not paid the monthly fees.

Because of Marva's enormous reputation, the controversy became a national story covered by The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and Newsweek. But all of the news reports were not negative. In fact some journalists defended Marva. Chicago Sun-Times columnist Mike Royko called the complaints against Marva "nitpicking—the kinds of gripes that might be kicked around during a teachers' coffee break. But nothing worth screaming headlines." He added that the "complaints didn't alter the basic fact that Collins was and is getting the kinds of results in her school that would delight most public school principals."

Correspondent Morley Safer, who did the 60 Minutes report on Marva in 1979, stood by his original reporting. He told Newsweek the critical stories aired on the Chicago outlet of his own network were "outrageous" and "loaded with inaccuracies" and he said, "I'm convinced that Marva Collins is one hell of a teacher."

The Wall Street Journal saw the controversy as "a story about the politics of education in this country, especially education in the inner city, where the public schools have failed miserably, Mrs. Collins's private success invited reaction because it became a reproach to that failure." The article concluded that "it's clear her critics have more on their minds than her personal foibles. They know that her success showed that poor black children can learn outside the public schools—with little money and without the bureaucracy."

Newsweek summed it up by stating that perhaps Marva had taught the nation at least two lessons. "The trivial one is that not

even the heroes of television docu-dramas are guaranteed to be free of human flaws. The important one is how much trust, faith, and hope the nation will invest in a teacher who holds out the simple promise, once taken for granted, of teaching kids to read."

Initially, Marva refused to respond to the charges. She told reporters, "My best defense is what I do These children can read." But friends and supporters urged heer to answer heer critics and eventually she did so on a special two-part Phil Donahue Show. Meanwhile, Westside Prep parents and community supporters held rallies for Marva, and newspapers received letters to the editor calling the criticism "a witchhunt."

The controversy only lasted a few weeks. When it was over, Marva was battle-fatigued, yet she and Westside Prep were unscathed. The school still had a full enrollment and a long, growing waiting list. She still had enormous public support and legions of admirers. As far as most people were concerned, the only thing the uproar had proven was that Marva was human and not a superwoman—which was what she had maintained all along. In an interview with The New York Times she said: "I've never said I'm a superteacher, a miracle worker, all those names they gave me. It's unfair to expect me to live up to it. I'm just a teacher."

For all their attempts to tear down Marva's image, her critics had never once questioned her commitment to teaching. And it was only through that commitment that she cared to be judged. The sneers and insinuations would never diminish her real achievement: Children who were educated, motivated, confident, and determined to make their own way in the world. They were her legacy.

Questions From Parents

Parents, you are the first teachers your children experience. You are also the most influential teachers they will ever have; everything you say and do is a model for what they will ultimately become. Therefore, the way you interact with your children has a tremendous impact on what they learn both in and out of the classroom.

Over the years I have consistently been asked certain questions by parents who take their children's education seriously. What

follows are the most frequently asked questions from parents and my answers.

QUESTION: How can I best prepare my children for the day they enter their first classroom?

ANSWER: The child that gets a head start at home is a step ahead when he or she begins school. Create a climate where curiosity is encouraged and learning is fun. If your children are naturally inquisitive, don't discourage them. Never shut them up or say, "Stop asking so many questions." Curiosity is essential for learning, and questions are a sign of an active, inquiring mind. Rather than squelch their inquisitiveness, compliment them for asking intelligent questions. Remember, if they can't talk to you, who can they talk to?

Even when your child is very young you can transform ordinary activities into learning experiences. For example:

·Teach your child shapes such as circles and squares. You can purchase inexpensive books in the supermarket to help you with this activity.

·Have your children accompany you when shopping, and introduce them to numbers and units of measurement.

·When going up or down stairs, have your children count the steps.

·Play games of rhyming words with your children.

·Turn car trips into learning experiences: categorize objects you pass and count them, e.g. how many red cars, how many churches, etc.

·Always speak in correct English and complete sentences, and insist that your child do so as well.

·When reading stories and nursery rhymes, ask your child questions to cultivate the habit of active listening. For example, when reading "Jack and Jill," ask questions such as, "What were the names of the children who went up the hill?" "Who went up the hill first?" "Who fell down?" You can also use stories to stimulate their imaginations by asking provocative questions such as, "What do you think they saw on the way up the hill?" or "Where do you think their parents were?"

QUESTION: How can I be sure my children learn to read?

ANSWER: Perhaps the most important thing you can do is to set a good example by making sure your children see you read often. In addition, read something to your children every day, no matter how old they are. Even adolescents need and often want you to read with them, or to have them read to you. Reading to, or with, them is a good way to discover their strengths and weaknesses. Follow the reading sessions with questions, such as, "What happened in that story?" and "What do you think will happen next?"

With very young children, put pictures on cards with the words that describe the picture. Show the child the picture of a duck, for example, and say the word and spell it. Do this every day until the child masters the process, then begin to encourage the child to say and spell the word without the pictorial clue.

Play vowel games with your child. Say words such as cat, fig, pot, pet, rid, red, rut, etc. and have the child name the vowel in each word. This activity not only improves reading skills, but speaking skills as well.

When your children are old enough to read on their own, insist that they set aside at least thirty minutes a day to read in a quiet place and take the time to discuss with them what they have read.

Use a dictionary to teach your child three new words a day. A rich and varied vocabulary is essential for good readers and speakers. Make sure your children are familiar with, and use, more than one word to describe the same idea. For example, instead of letting them say big all the time, supply synonyms such as huge, enormous, and gargantuan.

When engaged in everyday activities, teach your children words and how to spell them. For example, when cooking, ask them to name the first letter in the word pot, corn, and steak.

Read challenging, positive stories that instill values and morals, not banal books with no instructive value beyond "See Dick run." For example, Petunia teaches the importance of learning to read and think for yourself. The Pied Piper of Hamelin teaches the importance of keeping your word. The story of Pierre teaches children to care about life.

QUESTION: What can I do to help my child develop positive self-esteem?

ANSWER: Building self-esteem and confidence in your children is one of the most important things a parent can do. You can build self-esteem by continuously reminding your children that they are special, intelligent, worthwhile individuals. Never be afraid to hug them or tell them that you love them. Don't take it for granted that they know how you feel; tell them consistently and often.

Frequently, parents single out only the things their children do wrong. We should also praise them for the things they do right. For example, "I like the way you cooperated when getting dressed this morning," or "You did such a good job helping out with the dishes tonight."

Every day, tell your children what you like about them, and ask them what they like about themselves. Having done that, you can then go into the behavior you would like them do change or improve —and ask them what they would like to change about themselves.

When you send your children off to school in the morning, boost their self-images with encouraging words like, "Be all that you can be today" and "Remember, whatever happens, you are a winner and I love you very much."

When your children are faced with a difficult task, never say things like, "You can't do that," or "You're too small to do that." Let them try what they want to do. If they don't succeed, praise them for their efforts and say, "You did a wonderful job, but let me give you some help."

When your children make mistakes with their homework, or misuse a word, or add two figures incorrectly, don't just say, "That's wrong." Instead, say "That was a good try, but it wasn't quite right."