

PART FOUR

From Classroom to Community

Introduction to Part 4

Few contemporary issues have aroused as much controversy as the declining academic performance of American children. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education reported on America's declining academic competitiveness and urged immediate improvement in the nation's schools. Although the primary focus was on education in general, the commission's report, *A Nation at Risk*, also highlighted the achievement differences between groups of students. According to the report, what is at risk is the promise of a nation to provide all its citizens with an equal opportunity to develop their potential regardless of race or class. What is at risk is the opportunity for children to receive an effective education.

The news is even more disheartening when one considers that the liberal democratic vision of education as the vehicle for individual development and greater social equality is fading. During the last three decades educators and social scientists have offered explanations of and solutions to the problem of educational inequality. When separate and unequal schools were identified as the source of unequal education, busing was implemented. When busing failed to yield the expected outcomes, attention was turned to social attributes of the individual. The recipients of education, their family, environment, background, culture, and values were identified as the source of the problem—certain students were identified as “culturally deprived” or “culturally disadvantaged.” Various remedial and compensatory programs were instituted. Some students were helped, but many were not. Other approaches were tried, and sharp debates continued to rage over such related issues as centralized versus decentralized control, priorities in

school funding, curriculum, class size, and parents' role in educating their children.

Two themes seemed to have dominated much of the debate and research: the attributes of children and those of the schools. What seemed to be missing was any discussion of the classroom as the primary site of teacher-student interaction. What is the classroom "culture"? What teaching strategies do teachers employ? What is being taught in the classroom? How are academic and social inequality being reproduced in the classroom? How is order established and discipline handled? And finally, what is the relationship between classroom and home? The classroom remained largely a black box outside the reach of social surveys. In the last decade a new ethnography has emerged to examine schooling as a social process, but these researchers have usually focused on the reproduction of class culture.

The two studies that follow work in this ethnographic tradition, but they deal more narrowly with questions of educational effectiveness in terms of the role of teaching and the relationship of school and home. Leslie Hurst volunteered to tutor eighth grade students in Emerald Junior High School and saw teachers, stripped of support from the school and the home, having to negotiate compromises with their students before they could begin teaching. Her study sets the context for Nadine Gartrell's examination of Project Interface, an after-school, community-based program to promote mathematics and science education among African-American children. It sought to reconnect family and education through mandatory contractual agreements among parents, students, and administrators. By all available measures the program was a success inasmuch as it improved levels of educational achievement, but Gartrell asks how generalizable this model can be. Although Project Interface was designed for minority students, only a select group of children enrolled—children whose parents could provide the home conditions, supervision, and participation required by the program. Gartrell concludes that even if such programs were widely adopted, conditions of poverty would exclude the majority of African-American children from them. After-school programs for some children are no substitute for improving public education for all students.

Leslie Hurst
Nadine Gartrell

NINE

Mr. Henry Makes a Deal: Negotiated Teaching in a Junior High School

Leslie Hurst

Roald Dahl's book *Boy* contains stories from his childhood, much of which was spent in schools. First he attended a local school in Llandaff, Wales; then, from age nine to thirteen, a boarding school in England. Dahl's father, who died when Dahl was quite young, had insisted his children be sent to English schools because, he maintained, they were the best in the world. Dahl's mother complied. Dahl describes prep hall and one of the masters this way:

We called them masters in those days, not teachers, and at St Peter's the one I feared most of all, apart from the Headmaster, was Captain Hardcastle. . . . The rules of Prep were simple but strict. You were forbidden to look up from your work, and you were forbidden to talk. That was all there was to it, but it left you precious little leeway. In extreme circumstances, and I never knew what these were, you could put your hand up and wait until you were asked to speak but you had better be awfully sure that the circumstances were extreme. Only twice during my four years at St Peter's did I see a boy putting up his hand during Prep.¹

At St. Peter's the masters had authority over the student's mind, body, and soul. In the classrooms and in the corridors teachers had the right, and were expected, to shape the students into "good" and correct young men. In one passage Dahl describes Captain Hardcastle's proclivity and ability to plague him both night and day, both in class and out:

For a reason that I could never properly understand, Captain Hardcastle had it in for me from my very first day at St Peter's. . . . I had only to pass within ten feet of him in the corridor and he would glare at me and shout, "Hold yourself straight, boy! Pull your shoulders back!" or "Take those