RETAINING THE TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE IN THE PRINCIPALSHIP

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I began teaching part-time in the early 60s as a way to earn a little extra money while my children were young and I was not yet ready to pick up the threads of my serious career plans. The hours and the vacations were important to me as a mother, and I thought elementary school teaching—the traditional woman's job—would be easy. Easy it wasn't, but paradoxically the difficulties I encountered so captured my imagination that I poured into this transitory occupation all my varied interests and passions.

Teaching allowed for endless *variety*. The days were never the same. Each moment was full of idiosyncracies, often thought-provoking, funny, or deeply moving. It gave me *autonomy*, as long as neither I nor my students annoyed others, or tried to interfere with the way the rest of the school was organized. Teaching called for every kind and form of *knowledge*. Nothing that might possibly fascinate me was irrelevant to my new professional calling.

Greek gods, the properties of sand and sea, the motions of the earth, the legs of an insect, the nature and oddities of language, the stuff of myths and dreams—everything fit in somewhere. I took piano lessons again, armed with a new rationale. If I were indeed terrible at learning to read music, what a glorious opportunity to explore how many of my students must feel about learning to read words. And finally, teaching was *useful*. Here was a place where I could make a difference in the lives of others!

I also liked the world of school, at least most of the time. I liked the noise of comings and goings, routines and rituals, unexpected crises, the parents with concerns much like my own, even some of the internal struggles, and of course the humor. Although I occasionally dreamed of teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in splendid isolation, I knew that such a world apart would not be as interesting to me.

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It was in the hurly-burly complexity of trying to make ordinary schools work that I felt particularly challenged. These schools were, for children at least, the real world. It was within these buildings that children struggled to make sense of friendships, power relations, and subject matter, and tried to square their new understandings with what they knew of the outside world. Although school was artificial and the values within school strangely at odds with the children's family and community life, it still had its regularities and it was, as all institutions are, connected to the customs of the outer world. Sorting out the connections held value for me. I was startled into questioning assumptions that I had formerly accepted. I was always good at standardized tests, but only in reexamining them through the eyes of a six-year old struggling to find the right answer did I understand how I had intuitively known which to select. As one quick with words, I reexamined the meaning of "quick" and the value placed on it.

The ways schools were organized—the homogeneous tracks, the division of students by age, the scale of virtues, the labels "academic" and "nonacademic"—offered glimpses into social history. Why, for example, was putting together a student newspaper "nonacademic," whereas lessons in handwriting or filling in multiple choice workbooks was "academic?" How could I explain the great triumph of the Little Rock school integration fight to young children attending an all-black, ostensibly unsegregated Chicago public school? Conventional wisdom and common sense no longer seemed so wise or commonsensical.

What was for many teachers the source of discouragement and cynicism had precisely the opposite initial effect on me. It probably helped that I was neither very young nor inexperienced when I began teaching; therefore it never occurred to me that I needed to ask permission to do what I thought sensible, or that I couldn't reorganize the school if I worked hard enough. I probably suffered a bit from arrogance, and since I didn't want to settle for the kind of solutions that my colleagues accepted, I learned less from them than I could have. I unnecessarily avoided learning many tricks of the trade that later seemed so helpful and instead spent precious energy reinventing the wheel. These attitudes were thus sometimes hindrances. But they also were the traits that helped me to see each experience, even the worst, as interesting.

I was also lucky that my first principal was tolerant and that both the school and the neighborhood I lived in had a handful of other teachers thinking along somewhat similar lines. (It was also some-

what before the introduction of so much teacher-proof curriculum—learning systems and programs that turned teachers into managers rather than initiators. We were expected to be involved in developing curriculum, not just executing it.) But we did so in considerable isolation from each other and we assumed that teachers, unlike university faculties, had no right to expect schools to be personally or intellectually stimulating. Our sole justification was our presumed dedication to our students. As Seymour Sarason aptly puts it: "One of the unverbalized assumptions undergirding the organization and thrust of our schools is that the conditions that make schools interesting places for children can be created and sustained by teachers for whom these conditions exist only minimally, at best." We found the stimulation in private, behind closed doors. We never thought of defending it as our obligation as teachers much less our *right* as human beings.

It was precisely the privacy of the enterprise that I found most difficult. Although I cherished that closed door for the autonomy it offered, as well as for the coziness it created for me and my students, I acutely missed colleagues. Few in the wider world I lived in willingly listened for long to all my stories about school life, or wanted, as I did, to ponder its mysteries. (If I could have dressed them up as weighty research or policy questions, my efforts might have been more acceptable.) I was acutely aware of my defects as a teacher, of all the things that weren't working, the miracles I was not accomplishing, the ways in which I failed children.

I read everything I could get my hands on. I rediscovered John Dewey, I found Piaget, and I devoured many old classics. I also encountered the new literature—John Holt, James Herndon, Sylvia Ashton Warner, Herb Kohl. It made me feel less alone, better able to survive. By t .e time I moved to New York City in the fall of 1966, I recognized that teaching was what I wanted to do permanently.

On my first day in a New York public school, I witnessed a principal scolding a class for crossing over a line painted down the middle of the corridor floor. The teacher stood silent. I quickly backed out of sight. The principal's tone conveyed something that I instinctively felt embarrassed to have witnessed. Not only were the children being put in their place, but their naughty adult teacher was being publicly reprimanded.

Although I had seen these kinds of things before, they took on a new dimension. If I was to spend the next thirty years teaching, could I work this way?

There is a special smell, taste, and feel to elementary schools that suggests petty humiliations, imposed to remind teachers of who's the boss. I remembered that when I began subbing in Chicago I was daily informed where to report for work by a Central Board operator who addressed me cooly as "Deborah." Clearly this was not a familiarity that suggested friendship or informality. I realized to what lengths I went to avoid interactions with the school officials who controlled my salary and job status because these occasions so often ended in humiliating tears of frustrated, powerless rage. In many systems in which I had worked, we did not know our employment status until the first day of school, and we could be dropped or transferred without notice at various times in the course of the year. We had no choice regarding where we would teach, what grade, or under whom.

It had a cumulative effect. It seemed sometimes as though they had devised a system, the major boast of which was that no individual human preference would ever be taken into account.

This attitude was reinforced in matters big and small. We clocked in and out, were expected to eat our lunch with the children or hurriedly out of paper bags in makeshift teacher lounges. We rarely had much say over ordering supplies. Having enough pencils became a major concern requiring feats of ingenuity. We rarely had time or permission to make a simple personal phone call. Even going to the bathroom required diplomacy. Our best moments with our students might be interrupted by loudspeaker announcements or office messengers. Sometimes principals prohibited us from leaving the school grounds even during our lunch hour. Some of these practices were modified by the development of teacher unions, particularly when a strong chapter chair conveyed a new sense of job rights to her (too often his) members.

The accepted customs of most schools I knew were painfully reminiscent of those imposed on school children. No wonder then that we competed for the principal's favors much the way that children do for their teacher's. We were treated like rivalrous siblings, and vied with each other for more favorable working conditions or special breaks for our students. Collaboration revolved largely around gossip about the principal's mood, like children trying to read their teacher's disposition.

I noticed that my peers were mostly women and my bosses generally men. Because 80% of all elementary school principals are men and 90% of teachers are women, it is no wonder I sensed the "women and children over here" syndrome.

Some teachers easily adapted to this one-down position. Others, I discovered, used varied strategies to avoid the humiliations inherent in the administrator-teacher relationship. Demeaning students was one. Some teachers isolated themselves from the rest of the school, creating in effect their own one-room schoolhouse. A few took sides with their students against all rules and authorities. Some, mostly men, treated teaching as a stepping stone to more prestigious activities—union leadership or school administration. But most had learned to distance themselves from the whole experience, so that they became invulnerable to its emotional impact, placing their creative energies elsewhere. Of course, many quit.

Although these strategies had life-saving value, I saw that they also could be profoundly damaging to teaching. I fought, in turn, the urge toward each, but I didn't feel contempt for those who succumbed as I myself was always tempted.

I aggressively announced myself as an elementary school teacher whenever an occasion arose to do so. To my somewhat bitter amusement I found my well-meaning friends rushing to my defense. They would quickly assure others that, in fact, I was a very special kind of teacher or, later, that I was really a teacher trainer or a principal. They felt I would otherwise seem less significant than they wished me to be. And, the embarrassing fact is, I was often a little grateful for their rescue job.

Fortunately, in New York City I discovered City College's new Workshop Center for teachers run by Professor Lillian Weber. It became my home base, a meeting place that could both nurture and stimulate. By this time I badly needed both. The Workshop Center provided a setting that helped me to interpret in a more productive way the experiences I was having, saving me from responding to each and every humiliation as a personal assault. I began to realize that beneath those put-downs was the assumption that teaching young children could not be an intrinsically interesting or satisfying occupation for real grown-ups.

And so, when I had the opportunity in 1974 to set up a new public school in East Harlem, I chose to consider how to create the optimum conditions for making teaching as interesting to others as it had been to me, and how to offer the collegial setting that I had missed. I assumed that if I could do these two things I would be well on my way to creating a good school.

I took up being a principal with the determination to maintain the mind-set of a teacher, not an administrator. The entire school would

be my classroom. Children would stay in my new class for sometimes as long as seven years, not just one or two, and this would give me time to take a wider and deeper look. The constraints I had found so irksome as a teacher could clearly be loosened now, as I was free to manipulate some of them and eliminate others entirely. I could, to some degree, organize the schedule to suit teaching, order the materials I really needed, rearrange the budget in small but significant ways, utilize space more creatively, and relate to parents over the many years their children were in my school, thus providing a consistent and steady message about what I was trying to do.

The problem at first was to find a way of maintaining this teacher's mind-set while acknowledging that I was a principal—collegial although not quite a colleague. Although in some sense the students were all mine and the school my classroom, in another sense none of the classrooms was mine. I had a hard time learning to see the teachers not as technicians carrying out my ideas, but as collaborators engaged in a shared challenge. Furthermore, it took a sobering amount of time to imagine not my idealized self in each classroom, but the real people who came to work in the school.

I visited classes often, casually and informally. Sometimes I needlessly and impatiently inserted my views while visiting. Generally I tried to be respectful of the classroom teacher's setting and saved my critical remarks or helpful suggestions for later. Sometimes I joined as observer, another pair of eyes; sometimes to work with a group on an issue of interest to me or to the teacher; sometimes at the teacher's request, to inform myself better about a particular child she was concerned about, or an area of the room or aspect of the curriculum. Sometimes I took over the class so the teacher could take the day to visit elsewhere, or take a smaller group on a trip. Taking over the class was both humbling and gratifying. It helped me understand the problems described by the teacher and how difficult it was to keep the whole thing afloat.

The balance between collaborator and supervisor was hard to maintain. I had many ideas, lots of pet theories, and years of waiting to try them out in a school of my own. I found that attempts to impose my methods were, not surprisingly, of minimal value to the staff or children. I fell back on what I had learned as a teacher. When I felt trusted, I was more likely to seek advice, discuss my concerns and, in time, arrive at the solutions that fit me best. It turned out that although trust took a long time to build—sometimes years—it was the most efficient form of staff development.

The staff and I struggled with issues of autonomy and community. Not all decisions could be made individually, with each teacher going his or her own way. Some required collaboration and thus compromises. When the compromises were too great, teachers needed to know they could shop around for other schools with more like-minded colleagues or principals. Because the decisions made by the staff would sometimes require compromises unacceptable to some parents, parents too needed the power to opt out of our school.

It turned out that the level of trust and the type of match required differed for each family and each teacher. What one person saw as a trivial matter was a question of principle to another. The appropriate social studies themes for the third grade, our method of teaching reading, the accepted standards of language children could use, or the permissibility of chewing gum are examples of communal decisions that appeared major or minor to different people. Because we valued and respected each other, we went to considerable lengths to create consensus whenever possible. We found compromises or tried to permit individual variations when they did not entail unacceptable educational risks. It was surprising how often we were able to do this. Over time the knowledge that our colleagues cared enough not to outvote each other on matters that meant a lot to the minority—even to a minority of one—created a climate of openness and trust that was more powerful than imposition by majority decision or administrative fiat. We began to really listen to each other. It became easier to pay close attention to other peoples' strongly held views because they were not seen as threats to our own autonomy.

We tried to build into the school day ways to support the qualities we valued. Teachers became instrumental in decisions about curriculum, children's class placement, the way grades were organized, and who taught what. Which co-worker would be next door or across the hall, which specialist a teacher would be dealing with, the schedule of the day—the collective solutions to these daily problems laid the groundwork for interesting, reflective, and caring classrooms. Making this kind of sharing of power possible also meant that I had to build into the school day the time for consultation and the exchange of information upon which to make sound decisions.

Reflectiveness required a different order of time. We learned that it takes months, even years to see some ideas take shape. Above all, it meant recognizing that caring for others is very hard to do if you don't see yourself as capable of being helpful to them. There is a terrible and seemingly pointless pain in powerless caring, and it erodes the capacity for affection. So we needed to discover the ways to effectively care—to become better teachers.

We kept extensive notes and records of children's work, continuously experimenting with better ways to keep and use such information. We met to work out ways to sharpen our understanding of individual children's learning styles, to find better ways to organize curriculum as well as to increase our knowledge about the subject that our students were studying. We exchanged articles and books we liked, and we attended all manner of workshops, courses, and institutes that suited our differing needs.

Our resources were severely limited, and we did not all have the same priorities. Not everyone liked having a second adult in the room. Some preferred occasional visiting consultants, sending students out to specialists, or time to free them for small group trips. We tried team teaching, paired up older and younger grades, varied the kinds of specialists we employed and the way we utilized the resource room staff for children with special needs. For long-range thinking, we raised extra funds so that we'd have the extended time to meet at semi-annual weekend retreats.

But aside from the time needed to collaborate on professional matters, the growth of trust involved individual and collective acts of mutual support both on and off the job—helping out when family tragedies struck, chipping in when a colleague's purse was stolen or equipment vandalized, sharing the cost of baby-sitting so that all staff could attend weekend retreats or after-school meetings. Though comradery of this sort occasionally led to collusive resistance, our sense of collective ownership over the workplace mitigated this destructive side effect. Loyalty and solidarity are not always convenient, but they were central to our school's value system; they were the products of our increased trust and also the way in which the trust was kept alive and healthy. (This is one of the reasons merit pay schemes are so destructive.)

We even had to learn to accept the fact that at times some of us opted out, delegating power to make decisions to the rest of the group. Teaching is time-consuming, and our nonteaching lives often take precedence. Endless meetings can erode the desire to be a collaborator.

We were all a little wary. The staff that gathered included veterans of past experimental programs that had been destroyed by budgetary cuts and unsympathetic administrations, teachers caught working in schools whose philosophy they strongly opposed, former teachers

who had left demoralized and exhausted but were willing to try again, supervisors who wanted to go back into classrooms, and a few colleagues fresh from student teaching. Most had experienced the fatigue that comes from cutting corners to meet the endlessly proliferating mandated programs and mandated accountability schemes.

We were, I believe, called to teaching because we really liked the human species, whose individuals are by nature unique, unpredictable, complex, never fully knowable, and endlessly varied. We were glad that the real world didn't come with built-in multiple-choice boxes, precoded and ready to score. Our driving and motivating idea was to make the world available to our students in ways that made it appear every bit as interesting to them as it seemed to us.

Over the ten years we've been involved in our school, we've changed our minds about many things, scrapped some ideas and returned at times to others we once thought old-fashioned or passé. But we haven't for a moment ceased insisting that schools should be interesting places for every one of us—children, teachers, and even principals.