



A  
Portrait  
of  
Patsy



**BENNIE MAE COLLINS \***

**T**HE story of Patsy Merriweather is the story of Parent Education in the Gary Public Schools. It begins at Daniel Hale Williams School, an elementary school in the inner city of Gary, Indiana. It gives an overview of the many efforts and aspects of the city-wide Parent Education of the Gary Schools.

When Patsy "enrolled" at Williams School the principal was an "educational visionary" who dared believe that "all children can read." This author was the school social worker, who proposed and helped develop the first of a series of parent education programs based on the principle that parents can best enrich the children's lives by first enriching their own.

Patsy is the mother of four children: three daughters and one son. At the time she came to Williams School, she was a high school graduate who had worked as a Sunday School teacher and Brownie Leader. When her eldest daughter entered Williams School in September 1960, Patsy asked, "How can I best help her?" The principal's reply was, "Enroll in school and go all the way with her."

If schools give such a mandate to parents, the school's responsibility is then very clear—it must provide opportunities for parental growth and development. Although Patsy's opportunities are discussed in this article, these activities were available to all parents. Many parents, each with different background, participated in a variety of activities and formed a nucleus of involved parents who are now very influential in the larger community.

Patsy joined the Kindergarten Parents Club. This club was organized in the belief that it is not enough to give a young child an enriched learning environment for a mere two or three hours a day. He must have a supportive home which provides appropriate mental stimulation—and especially a mother who is tuned in to contemporary concepts about early childhood development.

*\* Bennie Mae Collins, Career Development Officer, Career Opportunities Program, School City of Gary, Indiana*

## Parents Club

The program activities for the Kindergarten Parents Club under the supervision of kindergarten teachers and the principal included the following:

1. Lectures and discussions on child development, early childhood education, parental and familial relationships, nutrition, and the meaning of play, conducted by school staff and resource people from the community and the Lake County Mental Health Clinic

2. Directed group activities for the development of games for use in the classroom and in the home

3. Introduction to the kindergarten program and to the role of parents in making kindergarten a meaningful learning experience for their child

4. Workshops for parents of children entering kindergarten subsequent to the organization of the Kindergarten Parents Club

5. A self-assessing questionnaire, "Is My Child Ready for Kindergarten?"

As a member of the Kindergarten Parents Club, Patsy served on innumerable committees, acted as a field trip chaperon, and volunteered to serve as a classroom aide. Finally, in 1966 when her son was a kindergarten she was elected president of the club.

During the summer of 1962, Patsy participated in the "Summer Parent Education Institute" conducted by the social worker and the principal at Williams School. The purpose of the institute was to train parents to serve as home visitors to help involve parents in more meaningful ways in the education of their children. This workshop was the introduction of a series of parent education activities called "First Steps."<sup>1</sup>

The institute had three major projects:

1. Home Visitation Program. Patsy and 42 other parents were introduced to basic interviewing techniques and acceptable home visitation procedures. Participants and staff engaged in appropriate role playing situations to high-

<sup>1</sup> "First Steps: A Report on the Daniel Hale Williams School Project for Parents of Children with Limited Backgrounds—Gary, Indiana, 1967." By Bennie M. Collins, School Social Worker, and Carrie B. Dawson, Principal.

light possible problem areas. The immediate goal of this project was to contact each home in the school district and invite parents to attend a general meeting to hear about the new plans and to fill out a survey form for the school.

2. Weekly Parents Meetings. These were small group meetings planned to introduce new career possibilities to parents, to encourage them to dream and to talk about their dreams with their children, and to help parents encourage their children to talk and dream about their careers.

3. Know Your Neighborhood. This activity was planned to include a motor caravan of the neighborhood, city, and Calumet Region, with an informal "gabfest" at the end of the trip. This session provided an opportunity for participants to talk about ways of improving the immediate community, ways of making contributions to the larger community, and how families could make more effective use of the educational, cultural, social, and recreational resources of the Calumet Region.

Following the Summer Institute, Patsy became involved in other carefully planned, intensive activities designed to help parents become more involved in and concerned with their children's educational experiences. Some of these activities were conceived and developed toward final resolution of specific school and/or school-community problems.

The 1963-64 Parent Education Workshops were planned to deal with two major problems: (a) the lack of adequate supervision for the lunch-play period at Williams School, and (b) the large number of non-participating "hard-to-reach parents." Patsy served as a trainee participant and neighborhood group leader in these projects.

## Group Activities

The Parent Education Workshop for Recreational Leadership was planned primarily to be a demonstration-participation activity. Parents were encouraged to use techniques and materials that could be used during a recreational period. Each parent made an identification badge to wear while on duty during a recreational period. Parents were also involved in developing guidelines which helped them function adequately as

recreational supervisors in the school. Specific duties and assignments were defined for each volunteer. These activities were planned and supervised by the school social worker, who also provided ongoing supervision and in-service training.

"Let's Be Neighbors" was a home-based group activity planned to involve the hard-to-reach parent. Parent volunteers in the in-service training program served as neighborhood group leaders and conducted regular, small informal group meetings to discuss school, school-community, social, and family problems as they affect the child's ability to learn and participate fully in the school program. Patsy and the staff prestructured several possible group plans so that each would consider at least one of several specific school problems such as absenteeism, chronic tardiness, personal habits, respect for oneself, his peers, the school, and relationship with school personnel.

In 1965 Patsy was one of the initial classroom aides employed by Gary Schools under Title I. These aides participated in an initial In-Service Training Program conducted by Gary Schools. During the latter part of the school year, Patsy was transferred to the social worker's office where she worked as a case work aide during the summers of 1965, 1966, 1967, and 1968. Patsy worked as a social work aide in the Head Start program.

The Parent Education Program was expanded under a Title I grant to include intensive neighborhood work in the Pulaski Junior High School district for the summer of 1966, by teams composed of a social worker, teacher, and parent visitor or neighborhood worker. Patsy served as a team member from Williams School.

Several outstanding activities were developed during this phase of the program based on needs expressed or observed during home visitations. Among them were:

1. "Let's Talk—Men Only!" . . . Fathers and other adult male relatives were engaged in group activities designed to encourage more active, overt interaction with boys in the community. A doctor and a nurse developed a discussion group activity based on the recording, "A Father Talks to His Son." Patsy convinced

her husband that he should serve as a group leader.

2. Mother-Daughter Charm School and Sewing Class in cooperation with the Lake County Extension Service. . . . Patsy supervised this very popular activity for mothers and fifth and sixth grade girls.

The Reciprocal Education Program, a program to train parents to become effective community leaders, was established under a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Patsy served as one of the organizers and the first chairman for the Williams School chapter.

In the spring of 1969, the Developmental Programs Office of Gary Public Schools submitted a prospectus for a college-level training program for paraprofessionals to the Career Opportunities Program, Office of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The convening conference was held in Denver, August 1970. Patsy was the paraprofessional representative from the Gary Schools. Subsequent to this conference, the Gary Schools developed a program leading to the baccalaureate degree with Purdue University, Calumet Campus.

At the present time Patsy is a trainee in the Gary COP and works as administrative aide to the program director. Her educational goal is a degree in social work. Throughout these experiences, Patsy has been a regular, active member of the PTA and has served in various capacities as a volunteer, committee member, and officer. She has participated also in the cultural and enrichment activities planned by her children's classroom teachers.

Patsy's experiences in the Gary Schools can be duplicated many times. Of deep significance is the fact that Patsy has grown knowledgeable and articulate about school, school-community problems, and programs. Children know her as a never-failing advocate and an effective teacher. She is a respected counselor for other paraprofessionals who have personal or educational problems and is moving toward the achievement of her newly conceived personal educational goal.

"A Portrait of Patsy". . . this is one school's answer to the ever-vexing question: "How can parents become involved in and with their children's education?" □

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