

## Young Children

MIMI BRODSKY CHENFELD

### Schools Children Run To

No question about it: as a major national issue, early childhood is *in*. Full- or half-day kindergartens? What kind of day care? Who should fund "latchkey" programs? Researchers add information on a daily basis. Educators and parents churn with activity as they strive to meet the new challenge.

I'm a simple person. I like to hang out with the kids: play with them, talk to them. Young children tell us how they want to be taught. We don't always listen.

Observe young children on their way to school: knapsacks on their backs, colorful lunch boxes gripped in their hands, their feet barely touch the ground as they bound eagerly to school. They can't wait to start the day. They insist on coming to school even if they feel under the weather. The climate in the school has healing powers.

What is happening in such schools? No matter the building structure or newness of materials, these schools are filled with love, fun, surprises, interesting experiences, and activities that promise success. The children know they will be safe at any speed.

A teacher paints a large ice-cream container, cuts a small hole in it, and turns it into a "mouse house." Every day, she reaches into the mouse house

and finds—ta tum!—letters from the mouse to the children.

Very early one still-dark morning, a family hears sounds downstairs near their front door. Nervously they tiptoe down to confront the intruder. There they discover their kindergartner—dressed and ready for school—two hours early.

"What are you doing up so soon?" they ask, astonished.

"I've got to get to school early today!" Their child jumps with impatience. "I think I have a letter from the mouse!"

Is today the day the children will wrap bean seeds in moist paper towels, place them neatly in plastic sandwich bags, and tuck them cozily into their pockets to make "pocket gardens"? Or is today the day they will see their bean seeds sprout with their own eyes?

You can bet that in such schools, young students are learning in holistic, integrated, joyful, playful, open-ended ways. Their days are rich with diverse materials, a wide variety of experiences that help them make connections, find meanings, and make sense of the world. I'm impressed with programs kids *run* to.

But there is a flip side. Observe those schools that repel their students. Watch downcast, reluctant kids on

their way to school—a dreary, stiff, scary place. Here children come to school healthy and get sick.

Mark's favorite things to play with are blocks. He *loves* blocks. But his is a school where blocks, sandboxes, puppets, stuffed animals, and play areas have been replaced by reading groups, workbooks, and flash cards. Stories, singing games, and free play have taken a back seat to language drills. In this class, the children sit around a chart that explains short vowel sounds, long vowel sounds. The tone of the class is muted, flat. Ask Mark how he likes kindergarten. His response is melancholy: "There are no blocks in kindergarten," he states, still trying to fathom that reality.

Which way will we go with early childhood education? Will we enhance children's lives or diminish them? It's a crucial choice—and there's no neutral when we're dealing with the strong but delicate spirits of our young children. □

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## The Teacher

PATRICIA MCDANIEL DOMBART

### Life Within the Walls

A friend of mine went straight from high school into the convent. After her first six months as a postulant, she was allowed to have visitors, and I was one of the first. I had missed Elizabeth—her wit, sensitivity, and vivacity. We met in the convent parlor under the eyes of the novice mistress, and to my

dismay, I found Elizabeth as bounded and diminished as her setting. In hushed tones, she related stories from her probationary period. After hearing her complain about another postulant because she always took the dust cloth Elizabeth wanted, I realized that the restraints and confines of the convent had warped Elizabeth's perspective.

About February of every school year, I observe this "dust cloth" mentality in full force at the high school where I teach. I myself become prey to it. Suddenly, margins on composition papers become more important than content, and I lecture on the evils of turning in papers written in red or green ink. I almost ram the side of the

business teacher's truck because it has been intruding upon "my" parking spot since September.

The faculty as a whole gets weird (or weirder, in some cases). People begin to arrive at the break of dawn and brag that they beat Mr. Barlow to the Xerox machine. As in *Caine Mutiny*, strange coffee mugs appear. Some people's coffee mugs disappear. Whole departments go a little "bonkers." English teachers horde memos, gleefully noting the mistakes and fantasizing about future confrontations with principals. At least once a week, social studies teachers discuss making citizens' arrests—first on students, then on administrators, and finally on other teachers.

The litany of injustices becomes louder, and some of us even react. We lock our doors and refuse to let the office aides—with their interminable summonses—into our classrooms. A

science teacher disconnects his PA box. Homeroom teachers make lists of all the duties nonhomeroom teachers don't have. We threaten to boycott the lunch line if pizza boats are served one more time. We growl at the lunch-line ladies for giving bigger portions (even of pizza boats) to their favorites. Female teachers threaten to violate the privacy of the men's faculty lounge.

Luckily, some semi-decent spring days break this logjam of idiocy, and a degree of sanity returns. We laugh at ourselves and follow our own advice to "get our priorities straight"—usually.

The danger is that the longer we teach, the earlier in the year we lose our perspective. Some people return in September already into the "dust rag" mind-set. The staff in my building and in most high schools are, in Jane Fonda lingo, "prime-timers." We have

been doing this a long time, and the walls close in earlier each year.

The solution? I don't really know. Maybe we should negotiate for week-end retreats in the mountains or at the ocean or for inservice days in which the school psychologist and the social worker give us group therapy. Maybe we need to switch roles with our principals or have our memberships paid at fitness centers.

I can hear the grinding of taxpayers' teeth, but a little money spent on revitalization is probably better than paying for substitutes when the business teacher and I go to small claims court—and definitely better than allowing a student to graduate believing margins count more than ideas. □

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## Trends

### English

CHARLES SUHOR

#### "English Only" Movement Emerging as a Major Controversy

Should English be declared the official language of the United States, or of individual states, and the only language used in conducting public affairs—from street signs to printed ballots to court proceedings? The question is not hypothetical but a point of active debate in a number of states and the U.S. Congress.

Former Senator S. I. Hayakawa (1987) and others have called for a Constitutional amendment establishing English as the official language; and according to *Education Week*, 37 states were considering English Only laws in 1987. Twelve states now have such laws in place. By far the most

publicized case is California's Proposition 63, approved in 1986, but the issue has been debated from Rhode Island to Louisiana to Washington (Crawford 1987). According to the Education Commission of the States, a movement is under way in Florida and Texas to get the English Only issue on the ballot in November 1988.

The long-range implications for education are unclear, but bilingual education could be severely limited by English Only legislation. Crawford's report notes that in at least one state, Delaware, the language of a proposed amendment to the state constitution would prohibit bilingual education.

The first organization to mobilize public opinion on English as a national language was "U.S. English," a

group chaired by Hayakawa. Their brochure, "In Defense of Our Common Language" (n.d.) has been widely circulated, and they claim 300,000 members. "English is under attack," the brochure claims, partially because "novel educational philosophies have led to extensive government-funded bilingual education programs...." According to U.S. English, private funding should be encouraged for maintaining "diverse languages and cultural traditions," while government should foster "the similarities that unite us...." A group called "English First," described by Crawford as a competitor to U.S. English, is also pressing for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The English Only movement is

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