The hopeful years: Children of the South Bronx: In the classroom and beyond

by Jonathan Kozol in the May 10, 2000 issue

April 10. A Sunny afternoon, but cool. The kids are in the big room at St. Ann's, an Episcopal church in New York's South Bronx. They are finishing their homework during the afterschool program.

Pineapple is struggling with the electric pencil sharpener next to the closet on the left side of the room. Eight years old, she huffs and puffs as she keeps putting the same pencil back into the sharpener, then looking at the point with obvious dissatisfaction, then putting it back in again, until it's down to almost nothing. She keeps staring at it with an irritated look, as if she knew that this was going to happen.

When she's done, she passes out the pencils to the children at her table, saving the one she's sharpened to a stump for last, then giving it to a boy she doesn't like because he teases her for being plump.

"This is s'posed to be a pencil?" asks the boy.

"Don't answer him," she tells the other children.

Grown-ups who spend time here with Pineapple comment on the confidence with which she uses her assertiveness to issue little orders like this to the other children. I can never tell why they obey her. Pineapple doesn't seem to understand the reason either, but she never seems reluctant to accept the power that the other children, girls especially, invest in her, and she deploys it with comedic ease, as if she finds it funny that they let her exercise so much authority in coming to decisions.

"You sit here. You can sit over there," she says, arranging children at a reading table in one of the study rooms upstairs.

“Why is Raven way down at the end?” I ask.

“I don’t know why. She *asked* me where to sit. So I said, ‘Sit right there!’”

She doesn’t seem to suffer any grave concern about the fact that she’s so plump. She talks about it more with puzzlement, or petulance, as if she thinks that unknown forces in the world conspire to expand her waistline but that her healthy appetite has no connection with this.

“She has a nice compactly packaged personality,” the pastor noted once as we were watching her among a group of other children. A pleasant kind of managerial assertiveness is very much a part of the completed package.

She can be assertive also when she talks to grown-ups and seems unaware that she is often going just a bit too far. She talks to me at times as if, between the two of us, she is the one in charge of things and simply asks me for a small degree of logical cooperation.

“Please tell me to do my work,” she says to me one afternoon.

“Okay,” I say.

She pats the seat beside her; I sit down. Next, she opens a spiral pad in which she’s written her assignment for tonight and places it in front of me. Then, with her pencil in her hand, she waits for me to read her the assignments.

“Spelling book—pages 65 and 66.”

She opens her spelling book and finds the page, looks up, and asks me, “Next?”

“Mathematics—pages 83 and 84.”

She opens her mathematics workbook.

“Next?”

“Phonics lesson—‘ess’ sounds. Write them out.”

She digs into her backpack, finds the phonics book, and spreads it open on the table. Finally, with all three books in front of her, she gives me her “approval” sign—thumb and finger in a circle—and begins to work.

She works for 25 or 30 minutes, asking me a question when she runs into an obstacle. She gets confused, for instance, in her mathematics homework, which is four-column subtraction, and she now and then reverses letters when she does her spelling lesson, studying a word she's copied out and telling me she thinks that "it looks funny," then erasing it and doing it correctly; but, for most of the half hour, she works on her own and moves each book aside once she is done with it.

When she's finished, she places her notebook against her mathematics workbook and aligns them with each other, then aligns them with her spelling book and phonics book and slips them all into a certain section of her backpack, which she then zips shut. The neatness in the way she does this and the close fit of the three books and the notebook in the space she has assigned them seem to give her a good feeling of completion. When she zips her backpack shut, it feels definitive.

"Okay. That's it," she says. "I'm done."

She puts her pencil and eraser in a side compartment of the backpack and gets up and, in this way, she brings the period of work to its conclusion.

She can speak sarcastically to other children and can, frankly, be a bit too blunt at times. "Your face is *shiny*, girl!" she said one afternoon to somebody whose mother had rubbed oil on her skin. "You could borrow the sun's job!" Usually, however, there's an element of foolishness that rescues her sarcasm and her jokes from real destructiveness. Like many of the children, she's alert to times when other children are too fragile to sustain the give-and-take of repartee; and when, as often happens at the afterschool, one of the younger children suddenly begins to cry, or seems to be right at the precipice of tears, she switches gears almost immediately.

One afternoon she and seven-year-old Elio finish their homework. Nancy lets them go upstairs with me and with a girl named Piedad to play a spelling game before it's time to eat. Just as the three of them are getting settled in their chairs, however, Piedad begins to cry. There's a cubbyhole between some colored cardboard boxes that are piled up to function as bookcases. The seven-year-old child climbs right in somehow and curls up in a ball and doesn't answer when I ask what's wrong.

Pineapple stares at her a moment in the cubbyhole, then crawls right in beside her. Her feet stick out, but most of her is squeezed into the cubbyhole with Piedad. I was alarmed when Piedad refused to speak and was about to go downstairs to get Katrice [who helps run the afterschool] or Mother Martha, the priest at St. Ann's. But

Pineapple makes her “okay” signal to me with her thumb and finger—and she winks at me!—so I get out the spelling game and sit with Elio. Within another minute or so, the two girls come out of the cubbyhole, and both of them are laughing.

“I wasn’t really crying,” says the younger girl.

Elio says, “You were pretending?”

“It was a game is all,” Pineapple says.

I don’t think that this was true; but Piedad’s tears are gone and I don’t want to bring them back, so I pass out the dice and spelling cards and we don’t speak of this again.

Children do things like this for each other that an adult doesn’t understand but knows he cannot do himself. Pineapple was eight years old that spring and I was nearing 62. But I felt powerless when Piedad began to cry, while Pineapple appeared to know exactly what to do.

I still don’t think that Piedad had been pretending. She cries at times for reasons no one knows. When she cries, she sobs; her body trembles. Teachers who have spent their lives with children of this age know what to do when things like this occur. They’ll sometimes get down on the floor and take the child in their arms and, if they need to, hold her like that for a while. I guess I didn’t feel I had the right to do this; perhaps I didn’t think that Piedad would have accepted it from me. She did accept it from Pineapple.

There’s a great deal of this automatic and insightful kindness in the hearts of many of these children who have been acquainted with unusual degrees of loss and sorrow by the time they’re eight or nine years old. They show it with their eyes and with their words, and rapid touches of their hands, and, when it’s absolutely needed, with their arms wrapped tight around each other. They’re good at being silly, but they’re also good at being gentle.

Gentleness and generosity, however, will not help these children much in overcoming many of the problems they will face as they grow older and attempt to find their way around the academic obstacles that stand before poor children of their color in our nation. Most of the children here, no matter how hard they may work and how well they may do in elementary school, will have no chance, or almost

none, to win admission to the city's more selective high schools, which prepare their students for good universities and colleges.

In a city in which four-fifths of all the public high school students are black or Hispanic, only 8 or 9 percent of students at Stuyvesant High, the city's most selective high school, are black or Hispanic; and the children of the St. Ann's neighborhood have, statistically, the lowest chance of winning entrance to that school of all the 1 million children in the city's schools. Most of the children here end up at one of three or four large segregated high schools in the Bronx, where 1,900 to 2,000 children are enrolled but only about 90 make it to 12th grade and only about 65 can graduate. That's the way it is for many children in our northern cities now. Some of these children seem to cry for no good reason. They don't know much about the world at this point in their lives, but they may know more than we think.

In general, I think the "differentness" of children at St. Ann's is overstated. Again and again, visitors remark upon the fact that relatively little of their syntax and the intonations of their speech—and very little of their selectivity, or whimsicality, in choosing things they want to talk about—supports the stereotypes in movies, for example, or sometimes in TV news, that tend to shape impressions about inner-city children in our nation. Some of the children do make use, at times, of syntax that some people call "Black English" (not only black kids do this, the Hispanic children do as well, because so many of their playmates are black children); but it isn't done continually or helplessly, as if they didn't know what standard English is. It seems more often to be chosen as a style suitable for certain listeners, but not for others.

If there is one area in which the children as a group do seem to differ somewhat, in emotional reactions, from the children that I meet in wealthier communities—and even here I would be very cautious not to overstate this—it is in their sensitivity to other children's moments of anxiety and their acute awareness of emotional fragility and of the tipping point between exhilaration and depression. I think that they're more worried about darkness and that many children here respond more thoughtfully than other groups of children do to times when little candles—sweetness, solidarity—need to be taken out of secret places and illuminated quickly.

At these times, they also seem to draw upon religious faith more deeply, and more openly, than many of the children that I knew, for instance, in the public schools of Newton, Massachusetts, where I taught fifth graders after my initial stint of teaching

in the Boston schools. Here too, however, many obvious exceptions come to mind, and I've had conversations on the subject of religion with the children in suburban schools that aren't so different from the talks I've had with children here.

The emphasis on "differentness" in inner-city kids has been a part of sociology as long as inner cities have existed, I suppose. When I was a young teacher, "the culture of poverty" was an accepted phrase. Similar phrases have been canonized in decades since. There have always been sufficient differences in *some* forms of behavior and *some* patterns of expression to make large distinctions seem legitimate. The distinctions always seem too large to me, however; and the more time that I spend with inner-city children, the less credible and less legitimate these large distinctions seem.

The wholesale labeling of inner-city children was, at least, resisted strongly in the past by influential and respected intellectuals; much of that resistance has collapsed in recent years, and many of these suppositions about "differentness" go almost uncontested. Some writers even raise a question as to whether children here may constitute a group so different from most other children, with a set of problems (or, we are told, "pathologies") so complicated, so alarming, so profound, that they aren't "children" in the sense in which most of us use that word, but that they're really "premature adults," perhaps precocious criminals, "predators," we are told by those who are supposed to know. It strikes me as a dangerous exaggeration that may seem to justify a differentiation in the pedagogies and the social policies that are enacted or applied within such neighborhoods, with greater emphasis on rigid discipline than on the informality and intellectual expansiveness that are familiar in the better schools that educate the children of rich people.

One of the things I have respected most in Aida Rosa, principal of the elementary school P.S. 30, and the teachers that I talk with on her staff is that they look at children here *as children*, not as "distorted children," not as "morally disabled children," not as "quasi-children" who require a peculiar arsenal of reconstructive strategies and stick-and-carrot ideologies that wouldn't be accepted for one hour by the parents or the teachers of the upper middle class. Still, ideologies like these are having their effect on many schools in urban systems now. Sticking labels—and, especially, *collective* labels—on the foreheads of the children makes it easier to treat them in a way we'd never treat the children of the privileged.

It has another effect as well, I am afraid. To some observers, it appears to justify the routine sequestration of these children in the tightly segregated neighborhoods in which they dwell, because this sequestration makes it possible to localize the “special” services that are believed to be appropriate to children who are seen as being absolutely and entirely different from our own. The children are already isolated geographically and racially. There are only 26 Caucasian children in a student population of 11,000 in the elementary schools that serve this district of the Bronx. To isolate them also diagnostically, and then to concretize their isolation with a veritable formulary of prescriptive certitudes, removes them one step farther from the mainstream of society.

It is true that the *conditions* of their lives are different in innumerable ways from the conditions of existence for more favored children in our nation. Their breathing problems (hospitalization rates for asthma are among the highest in the U.S.) and the absence of many of their fathers in the prison system are two of the most obvious distinctions. But the ordinary things they long for, and the things that they find funny, and the infinite variety of things they dream of, and the games they play, and animals they wish they could have, and things they like to eat, and clothes they wish they could afford to buy, are not as different as the world seems to believe from what most other children in this land enjoy, or dream of, or desire.

Some of the Guatemalan, Puerto Rican and Honduran children here eat rice and beans with many of their meals. When they have a choice, however, most will opt, alas, for hamburgers or pizza; and when Pineapple drags her little sister with her to the corner store to buy a treat between meals (which she does more often than she should), she usually reaches for the same big Hershey bars or packages of Twizzlers—reddish licorice sticks—that kids buy at the local store in my hometown in Massachusetts. Some of the teenagers watch Hispanic or black-oriented programs on TV; but they almost all watch *Sesame Street* when they are small, and more than half of them, I’ve found, were introduced to interesting rituals like hanging up your jacket in the closet and then putting on your sweater before sitting down to have a conversation by the same soft-spoken man who introduced these things to three- and four-year-olds all over the United States.

When Mr. Rogers came here, there was a stampede of children wanting to be close to him. They treated him as if they’d known him for a long, long time—which, in a sense, they had. He treated them as if he knew them too. He didn’t make a lot of general remarks about them later on. He spoke of individuals.

He knows so much more than most people do about the lives and personalities of children; but he didn't let himself be drawn to any overquick conclusions. He asked the children many questions. He asked the mothers and the grandmothers questions too. He also gave them time to answer. I never thought about "prescriptive overconfidence" while he was here. I thought of someone walking in the woods and being careful not to step on anything that lives.

Erik Erikson alerted us, now more than 40 years ago, to what he called the dangers of "destructive forms of conscientiousness." Imposing global preconceptions on the multitude of diverse personalities and motivations in a given group of children may be one of them. Rushing ahead too much to fill up silences when children hesitate while trying to explain something about their lives to us may be another. Children pause a lot when reaching for ideas. They get distracted. They meander—blissfully, it seems—through acres of magnificent irrelevance. We think we know the way they're heading in the conversation, and we get impatient, like a traveler who wants to "cut the travel time." We want to get there quicker. It does speed up the pace of things, but it can also change the destination.

Mr. Rogers told me once that he regrets the inclination of commercial television "to replace some opportunities for silence" in a child's life "with universal noise." At quiet times, he said, "young children give us glimpses of some things that are eternal"—glimpses too, he said, "of what unites us all as human beings." He also said that after 40 years of work with children he does not believe that being clever is the same as being wise. These seem like observations that are easy to agree with and then, just as easily, dismiss. I hope we won't.