

BOOK REVIEWS

ACTING OUT — COPING WITH BIG CITY SCHOOLS

By Roland Betts. Boston: Little, Brown, 1978, 253 pages.

Reviewed by Kim Marshall, Education Coordinator, Martin Luther King School, Boston, Massachusetts.

Acting Out is the latest addition to the genre of books by idealistic liberal authors that was launched by Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* in 1967. Betts's book confirms that the art of writing about urban schools is alive and well, for it is a superbly written (although shoddily edited) literary contribution to the field.

But the challenge that any new book to this field must face is whether it (1) helps practitioners solve problems, (2) inspires people in the field to new efforts, or (3) summons enough outrage to motivate people in the lay public to do something. My feeling is that Roland Betts's book fails to meet this challenge.

The author taught, subbed, and acted as an administrator in the New York public schools for ten years, which gives him a good deal more credibility than most other writers in the field, and explains his marvelous collection of anecdotes and his gut-level understanding of the problems he describes. His approach is to organize his stories into separate chapters on various people and phenomena in the schools — rookie teachers, puberty, bathrooms, PA system interruptions, body odor, field trips, etc. The trouble is that the stories are so humorous and captivating that they tend to overwhelm each chapter's message. What comes through is a fascinating and utterly convincing picture of life in urban schools, not an effective indictment, call to action, or program for change.

Unlike John Holt in his early books, Betts doesn't try to tell us what to do Monday morning. He doesn't try to spell out teaching strategies for maintaining law and order (Marshall), or describe an idyllic year spent with thirty-six children (Kohl), or show us an ideal school's effect on the lives of children (Dennison), or show us how to reach, touch and teach students (Borton) with gerbils, games, and 2,000 books (Daniels). He does not list villains to be boiled in holy oil like Jonathan Kozol, nor is he a cynical, battered, but dedicated teacher who loves kids, remains creative, and hangs in there year after year like James Herndon.

In fact, the most depressing thing about this book is that it was written as Betts left education and embarked on a second career in law. How much different I would have felt at the end of this book if I knew he was still at work in the New York schools!

But *Acting Out* is an important book; I would rate it as one of the best in the genre — as funny and sensitive as Herndon and as piercing and accurate as any of the others — for those who want to go into urban schools with their eyes open, for practitioners who want to laugh at a composite of horrors and humor from ten years of travel through an outrageous school system, and for those who want plenty of raw material for problem-solving and role-playing. The book raises all the problems in the most vivid, provocative, and challenging way, and is must reading for those who aren't in danger of being too depressed by it.

Why did Betts leave the field? This question bothers me, and relates directly to the frustrations and temptations that many of us feel all the time. Here is what Betts wrote in the final pages of the book:

I left public education worn out, exasperated from trying to cope with an institution at odds with its own clients. I had begun to regard the tremendous energy, vitality, and chaos in the schools as insurmountable obstacles. I had begun to see discipline, decorum, and order as ends in themselves — and I had begun to despair. The plight of the schools seemed drearier, less amusing, less hopeful, more desperate . . . If the children in the New York public schools were ever given grounds to believe that education is a challenge worth taking on, I would love to have a part in the acting-out that would take place then.

So another talented, idealistic, articulate person has been burned out by the public schools. There are two ways of looking at this recurring phenomenon: first, we can ask why the schools can't hold onto people like Betts — are the problems really insoluble at any level, as John Holt says in his introduction to the book? Does education have such low status in American culture that it can't compete with law, medicine, and business for the best and the brightest? Is the work just too hard, unsexy, and parochial for ambitious, cosmopolitan people? Second, we can ask whether the best and the brightest have enough common sense, toughness, savvy, and staying power to bring about change in the schools; is their reputation for being overly idealistic lightweight and short hitters justified? This kind of question is most likely to arise among those who don't have the option of going to law school or writing a book after the very public departure of someone who does.

Although writing *Acting Out* was an integral part of Betts's departure from education — a burning of bridges, an act of self-expression and self-justification which placed his experiences in the context of vast, insoluble problems — writing can also be a way of not burning out and leav-

ing. However, the kind of writing I'm thinking of consists less of telling war stories for a literary audience than writing about ideas, programs, and solutions for people in the field. Two other effective strategies for hanging in under tough conditions are: building an effective support group inside and outside schools, and staying close to one classroom, corridor, or school for a period of years so that your efforts begin to sink in. Betts gives the impression of tilting against the New York schools without a group of friends he could rely on and draw on, and he seems to have spread himself rather thin in his peripatetic travels through numerous schools and jobs, and this may have a lot to do with his cynicism and despair. It's been my observation that education is satisfying and rewarding in direct relation to one's proximity to the classroom, and this is particularly true in a system as monumentally screwed up as New York's.

Of course this assumes that the problems of urban schools can be solved, that they *should* be solved, and that individuals or small groups of dedicated people can make a difference at the classroom or school level. Here I am in total disagreement with John Holt, whose introduction to *Acting Out* is a resounding NO on all three points. Holt takes the inchoate message of Betts's book and crystallizes it into an argument for deschooling urban systems into small neighborhood learning centers with not more than a hundred students and six adults.

My own feeling is that this is impractical because of bureaucratic, political, and union inertia and self-interest, and that Betts's book does not make a case for this kind of reform. Another passage in Holt's introduction suggests another reason why this de-schooling would not work:

Our big city schools are largely populated, and will be increasingly populated, by the children of the nonwhite poor, the youngest members and victims of a sick subculture of a sick society, obsessed by violence and the media-inspired worship of dominance, luxury, and power. This culture, or more accurately, anticulture, has done more harm to its members and victims, has fragmented, degraded, and corrupted them more than centuries of slavery and the most brutal repression were able to do. . . . Far from being able to woo the children away from greed, envy, and violence, the schools cannot even protect them against each other.

Schools *must* do a better job of protecting students from each other and must provide an alternative to the culture which Holt mentions and Betts describes so vividly. Schools must also bring out the best in urban students' own culture, which is not all negative. As Holt does not mention and Betts does not stress, there are hundreds of teachers who are doing this kind of work with children in every big city, and there are more and more specific methods and materials which promise to help many more teachers get a handle on these problems.

This book should not be a reason for good people to leave education, but rather should announce a new frontier for a new generation of tough-minded, humane, intelligent, and talented people to enter as an alternative to law, business, and journalism. The book should also serve as an argument for not thinking in terms of reforming entire school systems, but rather for concentrating on the lives of children and getting ourselves into a position where we can have a real impact on as many lives as possible.

HANDICAPPED CHILDREN: Strategies for Improving Services

By Garry D. Brewer and James S. Kakalik. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979, 612 pages.

Reviewed by Alfred H. De Graff, Director of Disabled Student Services, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.

In very recent years, the majority of us have been educated and made more aware of the problems of handicapped children by a media series of public service announcements. The series which comes particularly to mind has admirably accomplished, through truly innovative programming, not only these objectives of public education and heightened awareness, but also has given us all avenues, or references, for seeking further information.

The fundamental message of this series has been to drive home the fact that needs of handicapped children do exist and cannot any longer be ignored; that these people do have (specified) problems in gaining access to the educational programs and facilities routinely enjoyed by the non-handicapped; that this access is not merely a privilege but a humanitarian and legislative right; and that there are (specified) programs to which both those directly affected and those with professional and humanitarian interests can appeal and make improvements.

The authors of *Handicapped Children: Strategies for Improving Services* have done a similarly admirable job in providing this message through the variety of researched topics presented.

The format of this book is to first introduce us to each well-indexed and referenced topic through definitions and an overview. Second, we are given a basic education on each topic and an understanding of its state-of-the-art. Third, the reader's awareness of each topic is heightened by a critique of primarily weak points of currently available programs and ser-