

# “Law and Order in Grade 6e”

*The re-education of a first-year teacher  
in a tough ghetto school*

By Kim Marshall

Most education schools do not prepare teachers for the realities of teaching. In many public schools, as a result, there is a tedious, trying, and wasteful period of on-the-job training: the initiation of young teachers into the business of teaching and “controlling” their students. Last spring I completed my first year of teaching at an all-black middle school in Boston, where this common problem was heightened by a particularly energetic and demanding class of twenty-five sixth graders; and where I learned that being a nice guy is definitely not enough.

Judging from my own experience, not many of the recent spate of books on teaching really confront the first-year trauma, and many of them fill beginning teachers (myself included) with useless illusions. I believe my own experience was fairly typical, although the school perhaps was not. The year before I arrived, the Martin Luther King School had missed 62 days because of fires, false alarms, and student riots. Last year it had a new (black) principal and a more orderly regimen, but it still had problems. So did I, all year. After it was over I almost succeeded in repressing some of the worst; then I listened to the twenty-odd hours of tape-recorded diary I kept during the year. The truth was inescapable — about traditional concepts of schooling, about the difference between theories and reality, about me as a teacher.

**T**he year began with high hopes and a proposed speech that would have taken forty-five minutes to deliver to my open-mouthed class. The prepared text made a number of points: we would work hard *and* have fun and thus grow as individuals; we would not be afraid of asking questions on any subject;

I should be seen as a source of solace and sympathy and students could come to me with all manner of problems; the desks would be arranged amphitheater-style for a more democratic atmosphere; students would work in groups and help to teach themselves; disorder would not be tolerated but talking for teaching would be fine; I would be in close touch with parents; and students should see themselves as part of a uniquely challenged group, the American black of the Seventies.

Although I did arrange the desks around myself in a sort of amphitheater, I never gave the speech. For one thing, I got stage-fright as my students filed in one by one and stared curiously and quietly at me; for another, I realized how meaningless so many empty resolutions were. Like the Nixon Administration, I decided to adopt the maxim “Watch what we do, not what we say,” and hoped I could deliver in concrete action on my unspoken promises. Like the Administration’s, my performance was nothing to write home about: I never delivered on some of my promises, delivered very late on others, and delivered in a half-assed manner on still others. Constraints which I hadn’t dreamed of made my proposed rhetoric seem very empty; within three days I wondered bleakly into my tape recorder at night whether I had already lost the respect of many of my kids. What happened?

First of all, I didn’t have my final class for a couple of weeks, and was constantly putting off “really getting going” while waiting for the final group to materialize. When it finally was there I had lost faith in a lot of my bright ideas and was sufficiently threatened by the incipient chaos in the room to avoid taking action on those I still believed in.

Second, I was shy and somewhat introspective before my students. For many months the most embarrassing





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event in the room was to arrive at complete silence (as time went on this became more and more difficult to arrive at) and then get stage-fright because what I had wanted to say was not particularly important — at which point I would deliberately let the situation deteriorate again.

Third, I didn't know what the kids were interested in, what turned them on, and was unable to rap with them and find out. It took a while to discover that many of them were completely resigned to school being an overwhelming bore — something to be endured and countervailed by the pleasures of sports, records, watching me get mad, and above all their fascination with each other. At the same time I was too sensitive and hurt by early put-downs of my ideas to see that underneath this, most of them approached me with a clean slate (although it very quickly became covered with graffiti), and that all of them had a tremendous curiosity about the world. I only really found this out when I started taking groups of four or five kids around the city (aquarium, airport, skyscrapers, museums) in my car later in the year.

Fourth, I didn't know how to teach the conventional curriculum, let alone one more attuned to their immediate concerns, despite practice teaching and “methods” courses. I rejected much of what I had been taught, rightly, as useless; but for many months I had nothing to put in its place — and by then it was too late for this class.

Finally, I neglected suggestions from colleagues to start with very tyrannical discipline; I naively hoped that excitement and close relationships would take care of control problems. This was theoretically sound, but in practice a disaster.

In short, I was in trouble right at the beginning and knew it. And the pressure began to build. With the tremendous energy of the kids, both physical and psychic, beginning to overcome their initial shyness; without a structure of repressive discipline; without academic channels or other constructive activities; and

without a relationship with me that would enable us to communicate (I remember with some embarrassment introducing myself by my first name and eating with the troops in the dining room, neither of which lasted long), they began to talk to each other. Incessantly. And I began to learn about repressing this natural urge, which pulled me away from the job of creating something else for them to do and built up considerable hostility in the room over time. So went the cycle for months, while I struggled to adjust to the situation I had so horrendously misjudged, and tried to break out.

I realized fairly quickly that a noisy peer-oriented classroom had an “anti-intellectual” tone to it, that in such an environment it was hard for a kid to do math problems or sit and read a book (one boy complained that reading was for girls, which was the message he got from the climate of the room). But repression of the noise simply wasn't the answer — although I was forced to get progressively better at this because of pressure from other teachers and the administration. I developed ear-splitting lung-power. Not the answer, because this situation revealed my own preconception of what happens in a classroom, the teacher at the front initiating all activity, the students passively following; learning being a passive, absorptive process rather than an active, questioning, engaging thing. It was hard for me to recognize my prejudices in favor of the passive classroom — and at the same time the fact that I was singularly ill-equipped temperamentally to teach one — because I had always succeeded and had fun in just this kind of classroom when I was in school. If it had worked for me, why not for my students?

Why not indeed! Had it really worked for me, or had other factors under the surface (highly literate home life, travel) made what seemed a passive day at school an active and engaging pastime because I identified

*Kim Marshall graduated in 1969 with a magna cum laude in Government. He wrote his honors thesis on Roxbury school problems, and finds himself increasingly interested in urban education. He took the photographs on these pages.*



with the material? Whereas the dissonance between long division, ancient Rome, English grammar and my students was so great that a totally different strategy was required.

As I grappled with these problems and struggled towards such a strategy (and I only really arrived at it after the end of the year), day-to-day survival was an issue. Every once in a while there was a dramatic turning point that seemed to be the long-awaited light at the end of the tunnel — but somehow it never worked out that way.

After a few weeks there was a spontaneous rebellion against my amphitheater arrangement by the girls, who rearranged the room traditional-row style, with my desk off at one end. Boggled by the lack of structure in the room, they had seized on their conception of “the way it spozed to be” from the past, even though they didn’t have very happy memories of that either. At this stage I had so little idea of what I wanted in the room that I put up only a feeble and ineffectual fight against the move (although I later discovered that if I really wanted something enough, I could get it).

The class began again in a more traditional style, but the vibrations from the young man at the front of the room were still as uncertain and lacking in engaging substance as they had been when he was in the middle of the room. The incessant talking and shouting continued between bouts of long division and grammar and spelling, and the fighting began. I found myself wading into fights between boys and boys, boys and girls, and girls and girls, and tearing people apart. One of the sweetest girls in the room tangled with another girl in the middle of the street after school. There were days and periods of days when I felt I had as much control over the situation as a fly on the wall. And in my tape diary I began to refer to all quiet with the adjective beautiful. My sense of humor faded and my shouting grew louder and more hysterical. I began keeping a batting average for the week and found that only two of five days worked out to be what I called positive,

while three were hell (in the full week, that made four positive, counting the weekend, which was just survivable). I lost weight and friends worried about me.

In October I came close to breaking out. I discovered the ditto machine and began writing my own curriculum and making it fun and exciting. The kids liked it, but somehow I didn’t sustain the creative flow and we relapsed. Conscious that I wasn’t doing a good enough job, and having been put down by one parent as “just a kid,” I was hesitant to approach parents, which also might have changed things.

Then a friend put me onto a new method of discipline — a “constitution” of rules, a predictable system of checks on the board for violations, with set punishments for each number of checks. I typed up a set of rules (which I headed “Law and Order in Grade 6e”) and read the riot act to the class. The kids loved it and behaved like angels for a week while I tried one final time to make conventional teaching work for me. But within a week their better instincts came to the fore (better because school was still a bloody bore and a pain in the neck) and they began very shrewdly playing on the system’s weaknesses. Soon there would be twenty names with various numbers of checks on the board before lunch, and the sheer bureaucratic load made me institute a system of taking checks *off* for good behavior, which was the death knell of its effectiveness. There were temper tantrums, howls of “unfair!”, and delegations of three and four boys storming up to the front of the room demanding that their checks be erased. By the second week I was in despair as the system I had touted so highly in letters and talks with friends crumbled into ruins. The now-familiar chaos returned.

Then one disastrous Friday there was another more encouraging dawn of hope. In the morning my prestige reached its all-time low when the whole class shouted together as I tried to report someone over the intercom system. That afternoon I was totally surprised when the boys (the girls were off at gym) began to talk earnestly about rearranging the room and putting some

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order into the proceedings. The upshot, after a vote with the girls present, was a return to the amphitheater arrangement and a forty-five-minute flurry of cleaning up, organizing, decorating, drawing up rules and punishments (corporal, to be administered by their leaders) and attendance rosters. I sat back amazed, and didn't have to say a word. We worked out a system whereby I would keep order through the leaders of the boys' and the girls' groups (there was a strict sexual segregation from this point on) and would be free to go forward with my teaching.

Alas, it did not last. On Monday morning the girls held together but the boys, whose leader hadn't had enough sleep, were more noisy and chaotic than ever, denounced the system, and demanded a return to the former desk arrangement. I refused, but was crushed.

There were several more times during the year that these “revolutions in self-government” happened, when either the boys or the girls would suddenly and unpredictably take it upon themselves to get organized. But we all viewed them with increasing skepticism, because, as became clear after the first one, I had failed to follow up with exciting and engaging work which would take the edge off their incredible restlessness. In fact getting organized became an engaging activity in and of itself, rather than a means to an end.

A wider and deeper pit of depression opened before me. I broke up with a long-time girlfriend and found several psychological scapegoats. One was the size of the class: *if only I had a class of twelve, I could teach*. Another was the lack of materials: *if only I had better books, I could teach*. A third was a group of six “troublemakers,” among them some of the brightest and most attractive kids in the class. Realizing that I had failed them but couldn't operate with them in the room, I badgered the administration to transfer them to other classes. And of course I blamed the school (*a prison*) and the system (*a dead end*) in Kozol-esque language, knowing all the time that while there was truth to each of these scapegoats, the real fault lay with me and the horrendously poor training and inner preparation with which I began the year. I reflected bitterly on a friend's comment: “A bleeding heart deserves a bleeding stomach.”

I fell into a rut of preparing work badly, not correcting papers and returning them, not trying very hard. A Boston supervisor gave me a “poor” rating, and the prospect of being fired and drafted became very real. My morale was temporarily boosted by a visit to a seminar at MIT, where a group of undergraduates listened to the big expert on urban education for one and a quarter hours without cutting up and talking and throwing paper airplanes. But my ego was soon squeezed dry again, and a series of friendly chats with a psychiatrist friend subtly began to resemble therapy. Basically I was still hung up on James Herndon's (*The Way It Spozed to Be*) injunction to take a rather passive role in the classroom, to let things happen. They happened all right, and I began to realize that this

technique could only succeed under very special circumstances.

Yet there were friendly days, and some marvelously productive lessons. I found that I was at my best with people working in small groups on more or less self-instructing material, with me moving around helping individuals and putting out brush fires. Every once in a while I would conduct a class this way, but somehow I didn't “officially” break the class into groups until February. When I did it I misunderstood the concept of grouping and created more problems. (During the summer I discovered a far superior method, the creation of “learning stations” around the room, which will be the keystone of my curriculum this year).

Around Christmas I began to weary of the shouting kind of repression and discovered an equally time-honored and effective method which I cheerfully over-used for the rest of the year. Playing on the kids' “way-it-spozed-to-be” instinct, this method consists of feeding a class a constant stream of busy-work. In my case the questions or copying contained just enough academic content and probing think-work so that I could rationalize it to myself (i.e., about five percent) and sufficient chickenfat to smother the class for hours at a time. There were still regular explosions and confrontations, but this made the holding action more bearable — and made me even more ashamed.

I also defended myself by becoming more cool and detached, and in the process began to gain back some of my humor. But then a very sympathetic observer from Harvard brutally (and quite correctly) attacked my detachment, my failure to get mad, sweat for the kids, and fight harder for my program. What program? I asked myself. Show me one and I'll die for it!

But the remainder of the year went more quickly. I returned from Christmas to cries of “Mr. Marshall, I've forgotten how to behave!”, but won a satisfactory rating from the supervisor. (Ironically, the Harvard observer visited my class on the same day as the supervisor, and observed that he had not seen “one iota of learning” take place). I finally grouped the class and went through a period of putting in four or five hours' work at home, going to bed early and getting up at four a.m. But I became discouraged when people threw away their corrected papers without looking at them, and realized that a system of more immediate reinforcement was required. The class stabilized; I began to get involved in other things in the school — including a long battle in a curriculum-development group for a reform proposal (which ultimately failed) — and to orient myself around doing a better job next year. The Harvard observer had said that I had “lost” the class, and he was right, but I began winning back some kids with my eight-hour Saturday field trips around the city, which were an enormous success.

Then there was a three-week teachers' strike in May which completely discombobulated the year, and it all faltered to a conclusion in June and somehow we had survived together.



**B**ut such a narrative doesn't really convey the three moods of the year, three moods which were always there — despair, absurdity, joy. Items:

One big boy attacking another with a seeming intent to kill, completely beyond control. All I can do for ten minutes is stand between them and block, football-style, for the poor victim, who still gets a couple of ringing cracks on his skull.

With this same attacker, a period of hostility between us that lasts for weeks and is close to hatred.

Slashed tires two days in a row, the second before I have had a chance to get the first one fixed, and never knowing whether the knife was intended for me, my rider, or one of the other two identical cars in the parking lot, or just for kicks.

Kicking open a swinging door in anger and whacking a boy on the nose, provoking ten minutes of righteous fury and tears that know no consolation.

Huge eighth-graders sauntering into the room in the middle of a class, trying to get a rise out of me. Once one of them gets me in a half nelson and rifles my briefcase, but is bored by its contents.

All the work of transcribing Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech is rejected by the class and I deliver a scathing and hurt lecture about how my best efforts are thrown back in my face. "Does it hurt, Mr. Marshall?" taunts one boy; "Always the same lecture," from a girl at the back. I never really figure out whether the idea fell flat because of the way I presented it, or because they consider King a square.

Constant thefts in the room. Girls in tears of outrage because I try to get them to protest a little more quietly, blaming me for not caring. One day the room is ransacked during lunch, several dollars and pieces of clothing and a violin are taken. Another time seven huge posters of black personalities are lifted off the walls.

A half-inch gash over a boy's eye from a flying Coke can. Later the same day a deep cut in the same boy's knee from a protruding screw on the floor.

Two girls accused of stealing money from another teacher, but nothing is proved and both protest their innocence. Subsequently one of them runs away from home and is out of school for two months.

The littlest boy in the room standing enraged after I sit him down in his seat, tears streaming, saying "Go on, hit me, Mr. Marshall!"

A torn muscle from sitting down a bigger boy. It is stiff and painful for six weeks.

Kids who, when backed up against a wall, will do anything, say anything, regardless of the consequences.

Mother-oriented insults hurled across the room, invariably sparking vicious fights. "Your mother plays around with Frankenstein!" "Your mother is dead!"

One boy's twenty-minute tantrums; having to hold him by the arm until he cools down, while the class goes to pieces.

Another teacher and I wading into a screaming crowd of a hundred kids outside the school to rescue two pugilists from each other. We don't succeed, the crowd

reconvenes magnetically, and we have to drag one of the kids two blocks away.

Setting up screen and projector and getting everyone ready for a movie. Then the projector doesn't work.

Two sensitive boys putting on their coats and announcing that they are leaving in the middle of a bitter confrontation between me and some other kids, doubling my problems.

Abruptly, chalk of all colors whizzing back and forth across the room, uncontrollably.

Pushing a boy too far in refusing him a cut in the lunch line, and returning to the room after lunch to find desks overturned, devastation. Yet nothing can be proved; we can only pick up.

One day two boys break off the tops of eight desks. The tops aren't replaced for months, so that every time someone forgets his top is loose and opens his desk, the top crashes to the floor.

Kids rolling around on the floor in hysterical laughter, falling off their chairs, pleading to be controlled.

A black guidance counselor denouncing me as a racist who "hates these kids" because I shout at them and had suggested (privately) that one boy was emotionally disturbed and needed treatment; a black principal who is constantly telling teachers to crack down on discipline, and urges us to use the counselors and psychiatrists available for problem kids. A black observer from Harvard chiding me for not making more creative departures from the set curriculum; a black coordinator within the school who scorns "creative" teaching and implies that white teachers who make their classes fun are keeping black kids from learning the basic skills and thereby holding them down.

Days when I come back to the room after dismissal and punch the wall hard three or four times, or throw a piece of chalk down the corridor.

An encounter in the corridor with a wild kid who holds me up with a tear-gas sprayer. Somehow I knock it out of his hand and take him to the office with his arm behind his back. He never threatens me again, but always greets me as "Dennis the Menace".

A sickening feeling in the bowels when a confrontation in class goes against me and I know I am losing control but can't back down. Times when I call the office and for some reason no one comes.

One girl's mother looking me coldly up and down and calling me "just a kid."

Myself, livid, standing at the front of the room, surrounded by nightmarish chaos, shouting "This class is out of sight! It doesn't *deserve* to be taught until you shut up!"

The first day I administer standardized achievement tests, kids hating every minute, struggling through, doing poorly, throwing down pencils in frustration, getting only half or a quarter of the way through when I call time. One boy who fills out the whole test at random scores in the middle of the class. After the tests, pandemonium. Chunks of eraser sailing around the room,

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hitting me in the back when I turn around. One boy cries in fury, half-crouched, for five minutes, another runs out of the room in tears when someone hits him, a third boy is bullied into tears before lunch. And then after lunch an experienced teacher comes in and teaches the way you’re spooned to and everyone is angelic.

A sensitive, pretty girl bullied into hysteria and running out of the room in tears. As I run out after her there is a deafening animal scream of triumph — blood tasted, a person on her knees — from the whole class. Stunned, I think of *Lord of the Flies* for the rest of the day. But the girl screws up her courage, returns to the room, and makes friends with her tormentors, in the process becoming a tougher and more adolescent person.

Hearing that another teacher is cutting me up behind my back and suggesting that I should be fired, I am so upset that I can hardly speak. I get in trouble with the kids and end the morning trying to shame them into silence by not speaking myself. It lasts for over half an hour and they are saved by the lunch bell. They are gleeful.

Toward the end of the year, stepping out of the school at the end of the day, I am slugged in the chest by an unknown boy, for no apparent reason; so hard that two ribs are separated and I am sore for weeks. Others identify him, and at the school’s insistence I take him to court. I have to leave my class on the last day of school to appear in court, but his lawyer doesn’t show up and on the way out I ask him why he hit me. Sullen, a large barrel-chested fifteen, he claims that I had grabbed him. Belatedly I realize what happened — he mistook me for another white teacher (they all look the same) who was policing the outside of the school and had been rough with him. It seems absurd to send him “away” for six months for that. I visit his home before the next court session and offer to drop the charges if he meets with me over the summer. He agrees, his mother loves me.

And most memorably, one girl’s voice that is so loud it makes the wax in your ears rattle.

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A quiet, busy class and suddenly the girls are screaming and running around hysterically. A boy has lobbed an eighteen-inch rubber alligator into their midst. I am upset by the noise and get the alligator in my hands by using dire threats. But as I bend over and stuff the thing into my briefcase for safekeeping, I am suddenly overcome by the absurdity of it and burst out laughing. The kids see me and we have one of the friendliest moments of the year laughing together.

One teacher comes down with hepatitis and the symptoms are described to the rest of the faculty, just in case: lassitude, difficulty getting up in the morning, constant weariness and stiffness. Someone says, ‘There’s a bloody epidemic here.’

A call late at night from one of my kids who asks

me if my washing machine is running and hadn’t I better go out and catch it.

Another caller, more persistent; a girl who rings me (and is still doing it), sometimes three or four times a day, and puts the phone up against a radio playing Beatles songs.

A boy in the class, his pride hurt by the principal, muttering about getting his cousin who plays for the New York Giants to come up and take care of that man.

A group of girls changing their names and refusing to answer to their real names for a week.

One girl who periodically flies into an incredible act of being a “hopped-up, doped-up soul sister” and is so convincing that I nearly turn her in for using drugs.

A Danish magazine confiscated from the boys (actually they let it fall to the floor like a hot potato, and let me take it) with some of the world’s most incredible pornography.

A dictionary arching across the room into the wastebasket.

Three girls unburdening themselves of complaints about the class and getting a round of applause from the boys after every pouting tirade.

One girl who literally can’t stop herself from talking and develops a tremendous persecution complex when I keep calling her name.

When real silence suddenly occurs, everyone looking up to see what has happened or who has come in.

A boy who is old for the class, and knows all the work, coming in after a month’s absence and insisting on sitting backwards and upside down in his chair, astronaut-style. He leaves before lunch on a medical complaint.

Some kids who ignore their name being called five or six times, just to get a little more of a rise out of you.

Little notes on my desk from the “Green Phantom” advising me on the merits of a brand of mouthwash.

Out at the airport, two little kids running happily down to the planes; I find myself nearly shouting that running in the corridors is against the rules.

A wild Thanksgiving party. One boy circulates a rumor that he has some Scotch in his Coca-Cola and is instantly surrounded by a screaming mob, twenty cups outstretched.

Our candidate for the student council practices his speech in front of the class and is booed and hooted and pelted into a closet, from which he meekly sticks out a little “V” sign.

I write on the board in the middle of a bunch of routine social studies questions “If an electric train is going east and the wind is blowing west, which way does the smoke blow?” One girl like a good union member refuses to answer it because “it ain’t in the book”. The class is dumfounded when I tell them after a lengthy debate that electric trains don’t have smoke.

The way I keep saying into my tape diary that today was the *worst* so far, that I had *never* been as angry as I was today, etc.

One of the angelic girls in the class calling me a

Martin Luther King School  
December 11, 1969 Mon. 3:20

© I want to be a famous  
basketball player like  
Bill Russell. I would like  
to talk like Sam Alcindor  
then I could make  
my team by making  
a very basket

Dear Mr Marshall  
you will pay for this  
I dont like you one bit  
because you dont know how  
to teach a class or you  
good maybe even perfect but  
not for me one you not stud  
enough to get putty up on  
the board I did it is stupid  
and thats why I want  
to change classes

ITs ABOUT Time  
ITs ABOUT space  
ITs ABOUT Time  
To smock YOUR  
Face

THE GREEN PHANTOM  
500 G.P.S.

you won't HAVE  
A GIRLFRIEND TILL YOU  
USE SCOPES.

DOES YOU

MONTH 3

EVEN FILL FOR BAR BREATH,  
DITY

DOE YOUR MOUTH  
FILL WITH BAD BREATH

WELL USE  
SCOPE ONCE IN THE MORNING

AND YOUR BREATH FILL  
FRESHER TILL HOW'S.

USE SCOPES ONCE IN THE

MORNING YOUR BREATH  
FRESHER TILL  
HOW'S.

MR. H. H. SHAL HAS  
BAD BREATH  
SHAME ON YOU

TO MR  
MARSHAL

From THE  
GREEN PHANTOM

Mr. Marshall you are unfair  
Even if you are unfair  
you are always making speeches

P.D. Repair

when, mr. marshall ask you a  
question at a like a baby

Because he said we were

pass it down

Dear Stump when I first saw your  
nose I said whats that on the teacher's  
face and John Johns I think thats  
his nose. you are hitting, But a long  
lanky faget stump ass

Sharnita Gidson  
one day I was walking  
down the street and suddenly there  
was a loud screech. I was I ran  
to see what it was my heart was  
beating fast I ran and ran because I  
was thinking of my baby sister so  
went I got there there was a  
car making rubber. He was going  
so fast I ran a slow and stop  
here I was so glad it was not  
my baby sister.



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faggot and congratulating me for putting on a clean shirt.

One girl constantly coming up and saying, “Tell me to shut up.”

A boy complaining that I am working them like slaves before the Civil War.

Record player playing discreetly, with my reluctant approval, at the end of a day, six girls bumping and grinding around it, the rest of the girls standing around watching enviously, and the boys hiding in the closet.

When I slip and let out a “hell” and a couple of “damns” at the beginning of the year, howls of protest and delegations to the coordinator. The third time I write my name up on the board with the malefactors and one boy raises his hand and says, “Mr. Marshall, you crazy.”

Once when the girls are doing their song-and-dance routine a boy sits back in his chair, feet up, puffing on an imaginary cigar, and says “Great, great, put ‘em on the Ed Sullivan Show!”

And of course the epithets: “Hey, slick!” “I’m going to kick your butt!” “Forget you!” “You bad, Mr. Marshall!” “Big honky liar!” “Hey, square!” “Oh, that’s cold-hearted!” and “My father’s going to come up here and knock your glasses off!”

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It is harder to look back over the year and pick out the things that were really positive rather than those that were merely awful or funny. If your definition of education is wide enough, as mine sometimes is, many of these vignettes were educational for all concerned. Still, I came out of the year with the feeling that I had failed to turn kids on to anything that pertained to conventional education, and had therefore not really prepared them to make it through junior high school. But there were moments when things were good enough to have done something towards this end.

An incredibly close friendship between two girls that lasted idyllically for months with only occasional blow-ups. One of them wrote on her folder in huge letters: SHARNITHA IS MY FRIEND.

Girls poring for hours over a book on childbirth and the facts of life.

A Christmas party in the room, which was beautifully decorated with tinsel and streamers and snowflakes on the windows and a huge lighted Santa, complete with napkins and cookies and presents.

Kids spontaneously playing the guessing game (*I’m thinking of something that’s . . .*) and keeping themselves organized for long periods of time because it was so much fun.

The girls’ song-and-dance group, which always got shy and goofed off when it performed, but was superb practicing illicitly in my classes.

A story by one boy about how he and I go to Alcatraz for killing too many women and I die in prison and he lives out his life near my grave. My psychiatrist

friends says it’s beautiful, but “handle with care.”

The class makes a large and superb scale model of Boston’s Government Center with their art teacher and it is the pride of the school.

A group of boys making up their own play and practicing it endlessly. A scene where a king receives a panting messenger who says that the people are starving and the king says “You got any proof of that? Off with his head!”

Beautiful pieces of creative writing flowing from the most unlikely people all year, despite terrific discipline problems in these rather unstructured classes.

Periods when everyone is working happily away in little groups, noise a moderate hum.

An intense Moratorium Day in October with Vietnam geography, history, spelling, and math (cost per second). Possibly the most interconnected and rigorous day of the year, and they dig it.

From my casual mention of man’s evolution from the apes, the fundamentalists in the class rise up in arms, full of righteous anger and quite ready to insult me and that guy Darwin. We have a long discussion, one of the few real honest exchanges on an academic subject all year.

Groups of boys spinning tall tales, writing stories, and drawing pictures of some of the huge wrestlers and how much they eat.

A series of exciting inductive lessons on the parts of speech, working backwards from the idea of a part of speech, through many examples of it, to the name. We fill three boards with adjectives describing the word Policeman.

All those moments of self-organization, however short a time they may have lasted.

My spring series of Saturday field trips around the city, which turned everyone on and which I am doing at the beginning of the year this time.

And a magic moment when I returned from court on the last day of school, minutes before the final dismissal, and everyone cheered.

**C**learly much of the story of last year revolves around or touches on the issue of “discipline” and control of the classroom. Why is this, and why did I have so much trouble and so little success?

At one point I thought effective discipline was a subtle emanation from a person in authority, which kids were very good at picking up; so that a teacher with complete confidence could have “control” the moment he or she walked into a room. Needless to say my vibrations were for months those of painful insecurity and uncertainty; I was easily discouraged from elaborately worked-out lessons by a negative comment; my momentum was easily killed by one or two kids.

Emanations of confidence, or lack of them, are especially important in any physical contact with kids — teachers with the right combination of humor and con-

confidence could manhandle kids and still get cooperation, while others couldn't touch them without a major confrontation. As the year went on I developed my own style of confidence and things became vastly easier to handle, although they were always touchy and strenuous.

Another reason for the discipline problems was that for a long time I was trying to use a system of discipline completely unsuited to my own makeup. After the breakdown of my original dreams of control through interesting subject matter, I listened more carefully to colleagues who advised me to get tough, and even to kids who kept saying "You're not mean enough, Mr. Marshall," "Tell me to shut up," and so forth. For several months I found myself emotionally conforming to the expectations of the system, parents, and kids: straight rows, quiet kids, busy-work all the time, and the teacher leading and initiating all activity. I actually became quite good at putting on an ogre act and growling at kids, but they knew and I knew that however ferocious it sounded, it was all rather tongue-in-cheek (I had one kid who, after the worst chewing out, would flash me a great big smile). And I slowly found that although I had good memories of the teacher-centered classroom from my own education, it was ill-suited to the combination of my personality and the nature of the kids. The way I formulated it at one point was by saying that to teach that kind of class in that kind of school, you had to be either a genius or an ogre, and I was neither.

As the months went by I tried to feel my way towards my own style of both discipline and teaching. But this process was complicated by the fact that I was changing as a result of the whole experience. I was being forced to abandon the Harvard luxury of "soft", understated masculinity, of leaving things unsaid, by the demanding and often threatening environment, by being front stage center for six hours a day. I slowly developed a thicker skin and a different kind of detachment and humor. At some point towards the end of the year my changes and my manipulation of the tools of teaching and discipline got close to merging, and a coherent style took shape and was reasonably effective.

Another problem had something to do with my own authority hang-ups. I remember saying to a friend in October that if I were the kids in my rooms, I would damn well rebel against all that nonsense too. This did not put me in the best frame of mind for punishing kids and haranguing their parents. Furthermore, some kids could be absolutely impossible when pushed beyond a certain point, and one of the most valuable skills was to see one of these confrontations coming and skirt it fast.

There was another reason for all the chaos. In the teacher-centered classroom, attention is at a premium, and if the teacher is failing, as I failed, to deliver positive attention to everyone in the class, kids will opt for horsing around as a means of gaining some negative attention. In other words, it is better to get screamed at than to be forgotten in the corner. Of course watch-

ing a teacher go all blue in the face and get really mad is also fun, and they played this game with me very successfully all year.

Probably the most constructive — or potentially constructive — force in the classroom was the kids' tremendous interest in each other, and yet most of my energies were devoted to suppressing this and telling them to shut up. In the framework of the traditional classroom this is a virtual necessity, and when I yielded to their spontaneous kind of discussion when trying to deal with a topic things very soon deteriorated into chaos and twelve people talking at the same time on five different subtopics.

The turbulence of my classroom, as opposed to the placidity of the suburban school where I did my practice teaching, reminded me of a metaphor that has interesting implications. Most kids from more wealthy backgrounds come to school with an inner gyroscope, with a kind of stability that carries them through the myriad of temptations in every school day, which gives them more future-orientation and ability to defer gratification, which in turn equips them better to put up with all the boredom and nonsense of school. Poorer kids, on the other hand, have a less effective gyroscope for a variety of reasons, and tend to react more spontaneously and completely to their emotions and the environment around them. I would hasten to add that this gyroscope is not necessarily an asset to a student. It means that kids from richer backgrounds are much easier to intimidate with carrots and sticks like grades and suspensions, and that the business of conducting the teacher-centered classroom, of simply keeping kids quiet, is that much easier to get away with. In poorer schools, on the other hand, the sanctions often don't work or are counterproductive, and teachers are faced with a vastly greater challenge: to channel and make constructive the tremendous neutral energy flowing out of the kids, to use their great ability to commit themselves unequivocally to all sorts of activities.

Of course there are other ways out in ghetto schools: repression being the most obvious (which is why the outlawing of corporal punishment in public schools is such a blow to the old system), and busy-work being another. And of course not all teachers in wealthy schools cop out on the job of arousing and teaching kids, although many do (witness the epidemic drug problems and alienation in many suburbs). But the unstable energy in ghetto kids seems to me to be a pressure which will put ghetto schools out in front of many more wealthy schools in breaking with the traditional classroom and trying new and more effective methods. The demands on teachers are qualitatively greater; as a result, turnover is tremendous and people burn out very quickly. But these forces, all these elements in the "discipline problem" that I have catalogued as my woes, are the things that have *forced* me to change both myself and my whole approach to teaching (such as it was, it was fairly traditional). It will be interesting to see what happens this year.