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NIARA'S STORY: A (REPPRESSED) IMPULSE FOR ARTISTRY
REFLECTIONS ON STAYING IN SCHOOL OR DROPPING OUT
BY MIDDLE SCHOOL AFRICAN-AMERICAN GIRLS
IN AN URBAN SETTING
presented by

Shirley A. B. Muller

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REFLECTIONS ON STAYING IN SCHOOL OR DROPPING OUT
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By

Shirley A. B. Muller

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ABSTRACT

NIARA'S STORY: A (REPRESSED) IMPULSE FOR ARTISTRY

**REFLECTIONS ON STAYING IN SCHOOL OR DROPPING OUT
BY MIDDLE SCHOOL AFRICAN-AMERICAN GIRLS
IN AN URBAN SETTING**

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Shirley A. B. Muller

The study centers on the story of an African-American high school student. Her name is Niara. Although she carries the name of a prominent female scholar and possesses an excellent mind, she is contemplating dropping out of school. Eighteen middle school girls react to, further develop, and reflect on her story. Through story-completion, drama, and poetry, these urban African-American girls identify with Niara and explore the facets of her dilemma. Their sympathies toward Niara elicit a forceful picture of their worldview, the beliefs, feelings, and attitudes that underlie their own feelings toward schooling. The components of the worldview are the girls' mothers, families, peers, teachers, other role models, God, language, and dreams.

The study is grounded in the concept of artistry, which the author defines as opportunities for creativity and personal independence. The data, in the form of descriptions and quotes from the subjects (as well as supporting comments

Shirley A. B. Muller

from authoritative sources, highlight the severely restricted opportunities within the girls' educational program for them to develop and maintain feelings and actions in accordance with their culture and the expectations of Black women that schooling be a freeing experience.

The participatory, conversational, choice-centered method used in the field work for the study suggests that its motivational power and intellectual content are appropriate instructional approaches for these students.

All girls in the study believe it is better to stay in school and graduate, but the price they pay for their resolve is the real story. And it is intimately related to the story of the author's stress-riddled experience in the doctoral program that spawned "Niara's Story."

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Mark Conley

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1993

All children are artists;
The problem is
To keep them that way
Once they are grown up.

—Pablo Picasso

Our "poets" have saved us.

—Maya Angelou

If
you haven't
lived it
spoken it
felt it
you do not
belong to it
own it
or adhere to it
like I do.
You
may approximate it
perhaps
say it
play with it
(or escape it)
but you cannot hope
to know it
inside the membranes of your being
as I do.
So, at least
grant me
the privilege
a right-of-way
of inhabiting
without
fear of molestation
my
inner place.

—Niara

PREFACE

This study was conceived with a transformative vision of education in mind. The vision is one of students soaring beyond their roots (where necessary) onward to the fruition of their dreams. Competent, empathetic, and sympathetic school staff and environment are keys to this picture of achieving, cared for, responsive young people. That the girls' schooling in this study fell so far short of my wonderful imagining and was, in fact, a conglomeration of transmission-focused, custodial, repressive measures is reflected by my attitude in the early portion of 'Niara's Story.' Those pages reflect my consternation and anguish at the evidence of yet another massive assault on the often-unfulfilled promise of African-American womanhood.

The tenets of Black feminism represent the spirit of rather than the sole philosophical basis for my several voices in the study--voices of friend, of sister, of other-mother, of teacher and protector. I begin my travels through the perceptive and lived experiences of "silent" girl students in a typical school that mouths the mantra of "change." I am observer, other-mother, and protector as I chronicle and analyze the vulnerability of girls being robbed of their life-force, their artistry. Then, as their voices, in a limited arena, grow and persist, overwhelming the outrage of my pen, I am their friend and fond sister-teacher.

If any label can be applied appropriately to my positioning in terms of this work (and not liking labels, I am reluctant to believe that any can be suitable for

more than a paragraph or a moment), it is probably my own interpretation of the nonstylish term "humanistic." Humanism implies love of learning, love of people, and holistic attitudes toward helping children live healthy mental, physical, and spiritual lives. Where Black feminism (an emancipatory, awareness, and nurturing doctrine) and humanism intersect, somewhere about there, is where this work is "positioned." In their mutual regard for human freedom and the transcendence of people laboring at the base of personal and sociopolitical mountains, Black feminism and humanism combine. Why Black feminism, more than White feminism, is that Black feminism honors the continuation of the (long, difficult, and ultimately purifying if not personally devastating) march of over 300 years of African-American womanhood. It is not an essentially new march, as is White feminism. It does not seek to blow the horn for the "new working woman." We have always had to work. It is not a disavowal of the historic role and "place" of our mothers, but a filled-eye love song to them. An acknowledgment (with gratitude) that "Here, because of you, stand we." As powerful as it is, the philosophy of Black feminism must be undergirded by the broader concept of humanism in this paper in order to adequately embrace my attitude that the liberation of the girls without that of the boys (and without the full-blooming of all the "others" now scorned or diminished by society) represents an obscenity on a massive scale. A slander of the still-shackled and the physically released alike. So, although "Niara's Story" is, in the first instance, an inquiry about African-American girls, it is, also, in a larger sense, a research into the hurts, loves, vulnerability, and resiliency of the human spirit.

In the middle and later parts of the story, having documented a partial tale of public abuse in the name of "education," I give my pen over to the *joie de vivre*

of the girls' personalities (for the most part), their sense of humor, the vibrancy of their "questions," and the distinctiveness of their intelligence. My voices in these sections depict both the humanistic and the Black feminist visions, the possibilities for the girls' rising, walking, and talking.

I have been called, by someone who knows my work and my ways of interacting with children, "a profound humanist." If any label can apply to one who is always looking for hope and seeking to learn (from people and from books) and to grow, perhaps this is the one that suits what I have attempted here. It is also the thing that most closely connects me with Niara—her search, her belief that mindless conformity is certain death, and her refusal to yield to "mainstream" mediocrity paid for at a high personal price. And so, in this qualitative-story research, my indignation (never absent), under the influence and attractiveness of the girls' personalities, relents so that a more penetrating tale of the students' lives in their school can be told through their writing and their words from conversations and drama improvisations.

The reform/research agenda of the College of Education has been more about the desire of technicians to excel than the need of children to breathe freely. Somehow in education, we must honor the students' stories and struggles as much as our own. We cannot continue not to hear the voices of young people who have pushed suicide rates to crisis proportions. We cannot continue to reform without input and feedback from our students. We cannot continue to shine the spotlight on Black males and leave the souls of Black girls to shrink quietly and die unnoticed. "Niara's Story" is a story I tell because no one is chronicling enough the story of beautiful bright eyes that grow quickly cloudy. Right in front of our eyes.

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I. Review of Literature

The qualitative study that this review of literature supports is one designed to tap the reflective thinking of middle school African-American girls¹ on the problem of staying in school or dropping out. All eyes are focused on the plight of the African-American male today, while the female suffers in relative silence. Previous work with the subjects of this study has intimated that a serious domino effect will occur in families and community if these girls "choose" not to finish school. There is little information on the Black, adolescent, female student in the educational literature. There is, also, little on the reflective use of the arts in teaching and observation, the methodology of the focal study which arises from the Theatre-in-Education movement in England and the traditional use of expressive arts in Black culture. The research question is why girls may believe it is better to stay in or drop out.

It is necessary for this literature review to be grounded in four areas in order to discuss the important components of the topic, to discuss relevant material on African-American females, and to give a good idea of the philosophy

¹This study was based on participant observation of eight seventh-grade girls and ten eighth-grade girls in an urban school. The girls responded to a story of a Black girl who was considering dropping out of school. Their responses were in the form of drama, story-response, and poetry.

behind the study methodology. The four topical areas are drop-outs, student alienation, African-American adolescent females, and the reflective use of the arts in education. Each area contributes some key understandings about the realities of early adolescent Black girls who voice their thoughts on the dilemma of remaining in school until graduation or dropping out early. In one sense, the research question is about the meaning of school to these subjects. Pertinent studies on drop-outs (from a tremendously large field) illuminate the seriousness of the problem to schools, society, and the ex-students themselves. Studies on youth/student alienation have highlighted the mental-health underpinnings and implications of the problem. Works on the African-American girl help to gain a better perspective on the dimensions of her life, the nonstereotyped existence of a girl who is more like other American girls than not, but who, nevertheless, has her own kinds of uniqueness that need to be honored. Literature on the reflective use of the arts in education guides educators to ways of better understanding students—and themselves—in the course of educating cognitively and holistically.

Drop-Out Territory

The topic of drop-outs is a broad one. Because this is necessarily the largest portion of the literature review, it has been subdivided into five topics: (1-2) contexts and characteristics of dropping out, (3) structure of schooling, (4) interventions, and (5) consequences of early school leaving. Important also are the category-overlapping descriptive accounts of the motivations and

circumstances of dropping out and remaining in school for particular students. For the present study, these, in the main, proved the most valuable.

Contexts

One such descriptive account is Willis's (1977) renowned study of working-class youths in England, Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs. Although this was not a drop-out study per se and dealt with males, it clearly delineated the contextual factors leading to large numbers of disaffected working-class students: the cultural asymmetry between home and school, low expectations of teachers, powerlessness of students, and subsequent (passive or active) heightened resistance to the schooling process. Willis's research, situated in cultural-reproduction theory, gave insights into the circularity of student resistance as perhaps no other study has done. In the process of raising imperative questions about the social and personal costs of resistance by working-class youths, he implied questions as great about the students who remain in school.

Michelle Fine continued this questioning in an updated mode in her studies of drop-outs. In "Being Wrapped Too Tight: When Low Income Women Drop Out of High-School" (1989), she presented a sympathetic portrait of young women unable to endure the rule-bound, impersonal world of secondary school. She asked more pointedly, in Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an

Urban Public High School (1991), what causes students to drop out and what it "costs" those who remain in (pp. 4, 229-230).

Lois Weis's study of Working Class Without Work: High School Students in a De-industrializing Economy (1990) addressed the identity formation of young white women in an urban environment that is on a downward spiral, similar to that of the African-American girls in the present study. She stated,

Schools play a major part in this process of identity formation. Yet, schools, and the students, teachers, and parents involved in them, are situated in a larger constellation of institutions. . . . The industrial plants of the city are dark, its future far from rosy. What does this mean to the school experiences of its students? (p. vii)

But Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and other writers have stressed that a depressed urban employment situation, with all its related ills, is nothing new in the larger socioeducational context of the African-American student. The female student's identity is formed between the pluses and minuses of her own culture as it accepts, rejects, is delimited by, or transcends White, patriarchal, mainstream culture influencing its own Black, patriarchal, nonmainstream identity. Of the entwined worlds affecting the schooling of the African-American female, Collins remembered:

I saw nothing wrong with being who I was, but apparently many others did. My world grew larger, but I felt I was growing smaller. I tried to disappear into myself in order to deflect the daily, painful assaults designed to teach me that being an African-American, working class woman made me lesser than those who were not. And as I felt smaller, I became quieter and eventually virtually silenced. (p. xi)

Her schooling experiences were largely of being the only or "one of the few" Blacks in White environments (p. xi), and the stress is understandable. But this negative situation served to undermine the wonderful feelings of worth and power she had felt earlier in an all-Black environment.

Leanita McClain was an African-American child of the Chicago housing projects who became an award-winning journalist. Her schooling experiences, radically different from Collins's, enabled her to escape poverty and hopelessness. But, just ten years later, the girls in her old school could not dream of similar relief. Clarence Page, the editor of her book, A Foot in Each World (1986), declared:

Perhaps nothing shocked her more than the deterioration of the all-female inner-city high school she and her sisters had attended only a few years earlier. In less than ten years, literacy rates at her alma mater had declined as dramatically as its teen pregnancy rate had shot up. All-girl gangs had appeared, and the faculty seemed to be afflicted with a growing malaise. (p. 156)

The teachers at the school resorted to a wide array of measures to keep afloat with their changed student body, but they were truly overwhelmed. In the midst of increasing school, neighborhood, and city problems, however, the girls had the same need for a good education and some affect in their school day. Many of McClain's newspaper columns dealt with the sorry state of education in the public schools of Chicago. They explored the ills that undermined motivation, concentration, and self-esteem—familiar precursors of dropping out in both boys and girls.

Other African-American female writers and scholars, such as bell hooks in Talking Back (1989), Septima Clark in Ready From Within (1986), and Maya Angelou in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969), have documented excerpts of their own past schooling and mentioned reasons for dropping out that they personally overcame. Gwaltney collected oral narratives of Black Americans in Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America (1980). "Avis Briar" and several others have mentioned lies that they were forced to listen to in school. Avis recalled, "In high-school they told me that it was the wonderful world of work and my father told me, 'Shug, it's a bitch out there'" (p. 190). "Nancy White" said that the teaching did not fit her learning style: "That's how they tried to teach you then. They'd show you what they could and teach you what they showed you. Now, I think I learned that way better than I did in school" (p. 144). In a more reflective piece, "Estelle O'Connor Kent" told her story of mounting learning frustration at school, being labeled, and finally dropping out, despite her desire to graduate (she eventually became a community leader):

I mean, I'd try really, really hard! I'd study, but I'd get to school and the teacher would mix the words up and I'd get a big, fat F. I wouldn't just get an F, but a big, fat, red F! I'd think to myself, "I studied so hard! I mean, I knew these words when I got to school!" When she gave the papers back I just knew I had a C or a B! But there would always be another big, fat F, again. After that, when I left Central, I really got a complex because they put me in a school for slow kids. Everybody knew that school as a school for dummies. "O, you're a dummy"--that's what they'd say to you if you went to that school. They sent retarded kids there. I wanted to stay with the rest of the girls and graduate with them. I never got to graduate from anything! I just went to another grade. I would have even felt good if I had got a diploma from the grammar school. By the time they were passing out diplomas, they had put me into a school that was slow.

Everybody knew that this school was for anybody that couldn't read, write, or spell. I used to feel so ashamed because everybody else was going ahead. I was kept back twice and that second time just did me in. The first time I felt that I might still have a chance; I knew that everybody was ahead of me, but I knew that I'd be coming back next year and I thought I might have a chance. . . . Oh! I just found it very hard to catch on. I have really tried. I have tried to all extent! I mean, I'd be going whole hog at it, but if that lady asked me to spell something, I just couldn't do it. (pp. 210-211)

Still haunting and instructive are the spate of books chronicling the abuse of minority children under the guise of education. Kozol's Death at an Early Age (1967) and other works highlight mistreatments that fester into dropping out or unproductive staying in. Another public school teacher, Haskins (1979), also wrote powerfully of the cultural incongruities and lack of respect by teachers that alienated youngsters and must have led, eventually, to a high number of drop-outs. The latest in this genre of educational exposé research/writing is Kozol's Savage Inequalities (1991), which tells the tale of the growing disparities between America's poor and better-off schools. At one point in the book, Kozol discussed some little African-American girls whom he met in a dilapidated school in the eastern United States:

I look into the faces of these children. At this moment, they seem full of hope and innocence and expectation. The little girls have tiny voices and they squirm about on little chairs and lean forward with their elbows on the table and their noses just above the table's surface and make faces at each other and seem mischievous and wise and beautiful. Two years from now, in junior high, there may be more toughness in their eyes, a look of lessened expectations and increasing cynicism. By the time they are 14, a certain rawness and vulgarity sometimes sets in. Many will be hostile and embittered by that time. Others may coarsen, partly the result of diet, partly self-neglect and self-dislike. Visitors who meet such girls in

elementary school feel tenderness; by junior high, they feel more pity or alarm. (p. 183)

A teacher described these children's backgrounds as deprived, neglected, and unsheltered. Children whose personal lives are too demanding for sustained interest in school for long. Pre-drop-outs, some of them. How many?

Characteristics

The profile of students at-risk for dropping out of school represents a long-term link among poverty, family, and academic performance (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992, p. 96), ordinarily a poorly functioning link. Now, however, increasing numbers of middle-class youths also are becoming drop-outs. Based on cohort studies rather than census statistics, the most reliable drop-out statistic for all students is 25%, with boys comprising a significantly higher percentage of the total than female students. The rates are higher for:

1. Urban areas where as many as 50% of school-age cohorts fail to graduate.
2. Minority youths (in Chicago, 38% for Whites, 56% for African-Americans, and 57% for Hispanics).
3. High school students (at present).

For the past 15 years, the drop-out rates for middle-class, White, high-achieving students (achievement scores 75% and above) have been climbing. This is also true for youths from middle-class ethnic backgrounds. This middle-class figure is growing, whereas that for African-Americans as a whole is decreasing slightly.

Thus, according to Lefkowitz (Franklin, 1992, p. 338, citing Hahn), systemic failure is indicated for schools when more than just a few minorities are dropping out and the phenomenon spreads to the middle classes.

Young and Melnick (1988, p. 389) emphasized that most school programs, policies, and practices do little to aid children in poverty, despite the availability of public schools for all children. The profile of drop-outs that they used was taken from Hodgkinson:

They are usually from low-income or poverty settings, often from a minority group background (although not often Asian-American), have very low basic academic skills, especially reading and math, have parents who are not high school graduates and who are generally uninterested in the child's progress in school, and do not provide a support system for academic progress. English is often not the major language spoken in the home, and many are children of single parents. Drop-outs are heavier among males than females--males tend to leave school to get a job (which usually turns out to be a failure), while females tend to drop out in order to have a child. Drop-outs are generally bored in school, they perceive themselves accurately as failures in the school culture, and are usually very alienated from school. (p. 390)

The preceding description of the "typical" high school drop-out is congruent with the narratives and comments made earlier in the paper. To Young and Melnick's profile, Soderberg (1988, p. 114) would add absenteeism, lack of involvement in extracurricular activities, and an average I.Q. In her survey of educators' knowledge of the characteristics of drop-outs, she found that teachers and administrators thought they had little persuasive power with potential drop-outs, so fearing ineffectiveness, they were likely to fail to attempt any intervention. She found, too, that in addition to the characteristics mentioned

before, overage--students who have been retained in a grade--was an important factor in students leaving school without graduating. She offered the following list of "Characteristics and Attributes of Potential Drop-Outs" from "Keeping Students in School: Problems and Solutions" by Neill (1979):

1. Tend to be more mobile than other students.
2. Exhibit discipline problems in school
3. Have a high rate of absenteeism or truancy.
4. Have average or slightly below average intelligence.
5. Tend to come from lower income families.
6. Tend to be low- and under-achievers, academically.
7. Feel rejected by, and reject, the school.
8. Do not participate in extracurricular activities.
9. Have frequent health problems.
10. Tend to have more personal problems, usually exhibited by behavioral problems or social withdrawal.
11. Are usually "loners" and generally are not accepted by their peers.
12. Communication between home and school is usually poor.
13. One or more parents did not finish school.
14. An older brother or sister is a drop-out.
15. Friends are outside of school, usually are older drop-outs.
16. Fail more grades than their peers. (p. 111)

The preceding list coincides, to some extent, with profiles given by researchers already mentioned. Its basic usefulness today is of some doubt because of its exclusion of middle-class student (drop-out) characteristics and the context of contemporary education in which drop-outs are often popular, well-heeled, and clearly are leaders. It also does not include characteristics that clearly refer to potential female drop-outs, such as absences revolving around home responsibilities (such as sibling care) and personality clashes with teachers (especially female ones). It also omits mentioning clashes because of cultural incongruities such as divergent thinking, speaking, and learning styles; ethnic, personal and social-interaction patterns; and level of acceptable personal self-assertion. The list is typical of the sort likely to be found in a textbook on teacher education which gives stereotypical answers to complex pedagogical and organizational questions.

Structure of Schooling

The problems inherent in cultural incongruities in schooling have been probed by Ogbu, Kunjufu, Zeuli and Floden, Steele, and others. Ogbu's work has documented unequal postsecondary employment opportunities for minority students as permeating their education. In Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective (1978) and "Cultural Discontinuities" (1982), he formulated his ideas about caste, job ceilings, and the lack of motivation of minority students in a historical framework. He refined his

cultural-discontinuity hypothesis in "Variability in Minority School Performance: A Problem in Search of an Explanation" (1987).

Steele and Kunjufu situated their perspectives on culture clash in the classroom on the lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of teachers, mainly, and their lack of knowledge of and respect for their students. Steele discussed the "stigma" that surrounds all the efforts of the Black student because of her race ("Race and the Schooling of Black Americans," 1992). Kunjufu's research on the education of African-American boys, Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys, Vol.s I-IV (1985-1990, approx.) has caused him to lash out hard at the existing school structure. The high numbers of Black boys customarily placed in special education, given severe discipline, and who regard school as preprison have serious implications for the education and success of African-American girls, as well. We have seen this partially in Estelle O'Connor Kent's narrative. The position of these African-American researchers was supported by the work of Kochman in Black and White Styles in Conflict (1981). Structures that support White culture and exclude or place value judgments on Black inevitably cause miscommunication and misunderstanding in schools and elsewhere. He introduced his volume with a quotation from Maxim Gorky (Enemies): "I don't understand you. I don't know who you are."

Zeuli and Floden (1987) discussed the implications for teacher practice in "Cultural Incongruities and Inequities of Schooling: Implications for Practice From Ethnographic Research" They stated,

Although ethnographic studies sometimes reveal ways in which incongruity contributes to inequity, the research does not imply that teachers should always promote cultural congruity. Unless teacher educators understand the problems underlying endorsements of cultural congruity, they may contribute to the miseducation of future teachers and their students. (p. i)

However, Calabrese disagreed with conservative and middle-of-the-road estimates of the value of cultural congruity in the structure of the school and the education of minority students. He stated ("The Structure of Schooling and Minority Drop-Out Rates," 1988):

The structure of the school is reinforced by a culture that legitimizes the backgrounds of middle-class students, but not those of minority students. The message to minority students is that they must accept these values, minimally conform, or drop out. . . . This culture is reinforced by teachers who have negative expectations of the abilities of minority students. Such teachers focus their energies on being punitive and desire to hurt, humiliate, and embarrass students. . . . These actions are sanctioned by school administrators. . . . Thus, an image is created in the minds of minority students and their families that school is boring, its curriculum is irrelevant, the discipline punitive, and the teachers don't care. (p. 326)

The social scientist, Jeannie Oakes, asserted that the structure of schools locks into place patterns and practices that make it hard for them to pursue either equality or excellence. In Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality (1985), she analyzed the evils of tracking or homogeneous grouping in the schools. Part of her conclusion is that the structure of schools purchases the achievement of a few students at the expense of many others. Similarly, the tests that help to keep such practices in place have been called into question by educators who believe that educational tests can do no more than indicate a

general learning problem (that may be "treated" in many ways besides labeling and segregation) or a problem of the school meeting youngsters' needs.

Intervention

Anti-"push-out" treatments for students with learning difficulties and interventions for preventing students from dropping out of school were the motivating ideas behind a successful African-American parent program in a neighborhood in Baltimore, Maryland. Called the "With and for Parents" program (and written up by Garlington as Helping Dreams Survive, 1991), it began in 1987 and was sponsored by the National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE). The purpose of the project was to foster critical activist mentalities and educational advocacy in parents of middle school students. The results of the three-and-a-half-year project showed that informed and supported parents can be effective influences in keeping their children in urban schools. Important elements in the development of more politically aware and "empowered parents" were (a) a recognition that keeping students in school requires a broad view of "the major assaults on daily living," (b) a realization that "parent involvement approaches need to be rethought and restructured as extensively as schools and school systems," and (c) an understanding that the students must be actively involved (p. 158).

Dombush, Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, and Ritter (1991) also investigated family influences on drop-out behavior as part of a larger, ongoing

study of families and schools in six San Francisco Bay-area high schools. Relying on school records to identify drop-outs, the researchers performed a series of comparisons between drop-outs and other students. Analyses of family and individual data revealed that drop-outs at the focal schools were not different from other students in terms of grade level, gender, ethnicity, and type of family background. They were significantly different, however, in terms of grades, attendance patterns, and disciplinary problems. A wide range of family-student variables were examined, including family decision making, parenting style, parents' reactions to grades, and parents' educational involvement. Recommended intervention strategies involved raising the level of parental expectations for their students and increasing the level of educational and other involvement with their children. These suggestions are consistent with the views of Comer in "Parent Participation in Schools" (1986).

Nettles (1991) approached the support of African-American students from a community perspective. She described a small number of studies and programs and concluded that research is needed on peers and adults who provide social support and teaching in places such as businesses, recreation centers, youth programs, and churches. Further, she thought there was a need to analyze acknowledged community contributions to the learning of students by community psychologists, lawyers, criminologists, and social workers (p. 142).

Two studies by Sansone and Baker dealt with in-school interventions that may help the potential student drop-out. Although neither the 1990 case study

that focused on ninth graders' experiences in a new environment or the 1990 study that described the work of an anti-drop-out committee dealt specifically with the problems of female or minority female drop-outs, they have some value as recent urban research. "Ninth Grade Students at Risk for Dropping Out of High School" highlighted the students' desire for a more personalized environment and recommended that the school give the students as much support after they arrive as it did in before-school orientations, course selection, and so on. "Interventions with Students at Risk for Dropping Out of School: A High School Responds" described a process in which a variety of interventions (mostly individual ones) were used to keep at-risk students in school. Two critical elements were identified for the fruitful functioning of a multidisciplinary team. The first was the number of increased options available because of instituting the committee itself. The second critical element was the set schedule for the group, which allowed it to handle problems quickly. The authors concluded,

Based on the findings of this study, school personnel searching for programs to keep students in school are encouraged to consider options within the school itself. With limited funding available to begin new programs, the use of existing structures may be a cost-effective strategy.

The question that needs to be asked is whether the interventions are effective on a long-term basis.

Consequences

A long-term basis is the length of time some drop-outs from high school must endure lower pay and lower self-esteem for not completing their studies.

In this final portion of looking at five sub-areas of the literature on drop-outs, consequences of dropping out will be considered. First, however, the territory of the female drop-out (and the African-American female, when possible) must be more firmly delineated. According to the American Association of Women's (AAUW) report, How Schools Shortchange Girls (1992, p. 49), 50% to 60% of girls who drop out of school are not pregnant. They leave for background reasons that affect girls and boys equally, as well as some that mostly affect girls, such as caretaking (mentioned previously) and other family-related problems. Thirty-seven percent of females cite these problems, but only 5% of male drop-outs do. "Girls who drop out of school are more likely to hold traditional gender-role stereotypes than are girls who graduate. Female drop-outs are more likely to believe a woman's role is in the home, not in the work force."

Twenty-nine percent of Black girls, 21% of Hispanic girls, and 36% of White girls give school-related reasons for dropping out of school—influences such as poor grades and dislike of school. It is often the most assertive girls who leave school early. Girls who have been held back in school tend to drop out even earlier than boys do, their greater sensitivity perhaps making them more uncomfortable in classrooms among younger students.

What happens to these students who drop out? What kinds of realistic life expectations can they hold? What is the cost of dropping out in the long run? Examining the personal, social, and economic consequences of early school

leaving, McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci, and Advis (1992) used the "High School and Beyond" (HS&B) data base to investigate the experiences of both drop-outs and graduates in 1986, four years past the projected graduation date. Drop-outs and graduates who did not go on to college were compared on the variables of self-esteem, alcohol use, political/social participation, work satisfaction, salary, periods of unemployment, and number of jobs. Multiple-regression analyses were used to determine the extent to which dropping out explained variance in those measures when race, urbanicity, region, socioeconomic status, and academic achievement were controlled for. The responses of almost 600 drop-outs were analyzed. The researchers advised that their results be interpreted with caution because of certain factors in the test design, such as short time span. The results were:

1. No differences were found relative to self-esteem.
2. On other personal and social measures, the male drop-outs appeared to be less successful:
 - a. Significantly more alcohol consumption.
 - b. Less likely to vote (also true of females).
 - c. Less likely to participate in church (while females were likely to be active in sports and other activities).
 - d. More periods of unemployment.
3. Female drop-outs reported more unemployment, but this factor was complicated ("contaminated") by urbanicity, race, and SES.

- a. Reported less job satisfaction.
 - b. Surprisingly, fewer jobs than graduates.
4. No significant salary disparity in either females or males.

The researchers recommended that other studies investigate further these results. Although the economic differences between same-gender people were not significant, the differences between genders would be interesting to see. Of particular interest would be the statistics for drop-out women with various ethnicities considered.

Scott-Jones, Roland, and White (1989) stressed in Black Adolescents that "Women, particularly Black women, have low earning power in American society." This situation is made worse by complications of dropping out of school and/or the burden of teen-age parenthood. Female African-American drop-outs somewhat increase their earning power and chances of self-determination by returning to school, no matter what their original reasons for leaving (p. 356).

Alienation

Many African-American girls leave school because they are alienated from much that goes on there. Calabrese (1986) has done extensive research on the subject of student alienation and characterized it as a rejection of traditional values and practices caused by a society that paints some groups into an "alienation corner" (p. 120). He said, further:

Females may be forced to experience an education that fosters alienation by promoting a male-oriented learning environment. . . . This secondary

school environment, created, managed, directed and evaluated by males, may function in ways that are counter to the needs of female adolescents. The male influence on development and implementation of curricula, teaching methodology and interpersonal dynamics may create a potentially hostile environment, causing females to feel like aliens in a strange environment.

This alienation, being comprised of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement, may come in combination with the sense of anger and oppression the Black student is already suffering.

One of the chief stressors for girls is the difficult adjustment that girls must make from the feminized environment of the elementary school to the male-dominated next level. The greater competitiveness of the secondary level "may account for changes in female achievement after grades nine and ten" (Calabrese, 1986, p. 122). Taking the middle school, grades 7 and 8, as the "secondary level," the change in achievement may come earlier. Calabrese stressed, "There is considerable evidence that the secondary school does not meet the needs of females and in fact may cause them to adopt male roles if they are to succeed" (p. 123).

The effect of alienation is a deterioration in the students' emotional health. With many students living in pressured or abusive environments in an increasingly unstable society, "adolescence is marked by high rates of illegitimate births, . . . suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, homicides, accidents, and increased numbers of children living in broken homes" (Calabrese, 1987, p. 14).

Blacks between the ages of 15-24 commit suicide at a rate higher than that of the total Black population of all ages. This is especially true for

young Black females. . . . Suicide is the most common cause of death among young Black women. (Meyers, 1989, pp. 136, 138).

This information on the alienation of students corroborates Elkind's (1984) views that young people labor with "patchwork selves" in the absence of meaningful, integrated lives today (p. 171). This information also coincides with the ideas of many writers who have chronicled the alienation of Black youths and its personal, familial, and social consequences. These chronicles are customarily of Black males. The news is African-American girls and boys who manage to lead normal, productive lives despite the oppression under which their race exists in America and the prevalence of less than satisfactory schools for most Black youths.

African-American Girls

It has already been stated that extensive, rich material on the African-American female student is nonexistent in the educational literature. She is usually mentioned in groupings of Black youths, if she is mentioned at all. On the rare occasions she rates separate mention or discussion, it is usually because she "has gotten herself" pregnant. Into this dismal informational vacuum on the Black adolescent female has come the refreshing story of a junior high school girl in the Bronx--written by herself. The Diary of Latoya Hunter: My First Year in Junior High (1992) provides interesting insights into the personal life of a normal, bright, successful student. From her perspective, we learn of her disappointment in her new school, with some of her teachers; her intense love of her family; her

empathy for others; her belief in God; and her opinions and longings. Here is her description of a poor schooling experience:

Some people just aren't made for certain professions. My computer teacher proved that today. Kids are supposed to go to school to learn new things, vocabulary is one of them, but the words the teacher used! Parents don't send their kids to school to learn obscenities. . . . It's not right. If she wants us to respect her she has to respect us first. Some kids in my class talked to our homeroom teacher Mr. Sontze about it. As usual he can't do anything. I don't think we want to go to the principal. If it gets worse, maybe. (p. 17).

And a fine one:

He's warm, caring, loving and everything else that comes with a great human being. He didn't only teach me academic things like math, English and so on. He taught me how to be open-minded to all kinds of people. He did that by making us empathize with other people, in other words, put ourselves into their place and write about it. I went from being a sister of a retarded boy named Victor to being a Jewish girl whose family was taken away from me back in the Hitler days. (p. 21)

It may rightly be said that this conscientized, talented girl is not an American product. She and her family are from Jamaica. But she is a Black adolescent who is being exposed to the stresses of urban life. Fortunately, she has two concerned parents to guide her through, but she has suffered a frightening, potentially lethal street experience and knows a man who was killed in a neighborhood store. Because of her diary, this gifted writer helps readers understand feelings and reactions that are typical for girls her age. She probably will not become a drop-out because of all the positive factors in her life. Yet she is exposed to many of the same circumstances that other girls face and do not overcome.

Early adolescence is a time of rapid and drastic physical change, as well as an important period for the further development of a positive identity in youths. This is a time of students growing more comfortable with their Black identity or possibly rejecting or compromising it because of the pressures of mainstream White society and its images and standards. For the middle school/junior-high-aged African-American girl, it is likely to be a stressful time because of bodily changes, external standards of beauty (White values), and all the changes accompanying attendance at a different school. Straight through the secondary school years, the African-American girl requires emotional support, reassurances, and sensitive handling, according to Black psychologists Hopson and Hopson in Different and Wonderful: Raising Black Children in a Race-Conscious Society (1990, pp. 163-171). They affirmed that Latoya Hunter and other Black girls can come through safely if they have support, some freedom, understanding, and imagination and dreams to grow on.

The Reflective Use of the Arts in Education

Imagination is needed in organizing a more effective educational experience for students at risk of life and limb in certain urban areas, as well as in some schools, in order to feed their minds and spirits against the violence of life. Picasso said that all children are artists, and the problem is to keep them that way once they are grown up. It may be that the problem for Black, urban girls in danger of dropping out of school is keeping the ability to "paint" their own

lives in a self-relevant way. Part of the charge of the school is surely to reduce the alienation and "internal oppression" felt by children pressured to conform and reject their backgrounds in the name of school success. Although it is true that some personal changes may eventually increase the mental health and economic position of students, change is always resisted by people trying to understand and hang onto their piece of inherited world. It seems natural, therefore, to use arts in the curriculum of African-American students. Their culture has historically been a creative, artistic one, and the arts are a perfect medium for understanding and reflecting spiritually and cognitively. They provide, as they always have, a way of healing and inner survival, according to poet, author, and actress Maya Angelou in her autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969, p. 156).

Dramatic/artistic "play" is a natural part of childhood for many children, but it is sorely missing from the barren "basics-and-control" curricula foisted upon urban minority children. Those who need it most have the arts missing from their school world. Yet, according to Curry and Bergen in "The Relationship of Play to Emotional, Social, and Gender/Sex Role Development" (1988), "It is clear that play can be a window to children's emotional lives and that it serves as a diagnostic as well as curricular tool" (p. 120).

For this reason, the authors of Children in Danger (Garbarino & others, 1992), child development and mental health specialists, found the use of art and play useful in their work. That work is understanding the lives of children around

the world who grow up in the midst of violence, in foreign and America's urban "war zones." They found:

Play and art activities encourage children to express themselves and to form and communicate an account that can be the starting point for a healing dialogue with an understanding adult. These activities enable the child to give voice to a[n] . . . experience without the requisite of cognitive understanding, verbal capability, or overt cultural permission. The . . . use of play and art can help children reinstate their sense of inner control, reestablish self-worth and self-esteem, and develop relationships of trust. Thus, we see it as central to any programmatic efforts to help children overcome the trauma that comes of living with community violence. (p. 204)

Thus, the deliberate choice of arts as the basis of the dialogues (conversations) with the girls in this study is appropriate for students who may have developed coping mechanisms that do not allow for open expressions of their thinking and may have numbed themselves against self-revelation in the context of the school, but for whom self-expressiveness is a natural form of communication.

The following is an overview of the concept of arts-as-education (integrated curricular art) as the methodology employed in the study. Discussed are improvisational (or educational or audienceless) drama and the dialogically-based use of story and poetry.

The idea of using drama to facilitate the curriculum or give form to experience and imagination arose during the Theatre in Education (TIE) movement in England. Many dedicated educators have developed from this concept of placing drama between real life and the theater to help students

1. Interact socially.
2. Explore an unlimited number of roles and attitudes symbolically.
3. Test out ideas vicariously.
4. Grow in ability to communicate and to challenge ideas.
5. Grow in self-confidence.
6. Increase perceptions and understandings of the world. (McGregor, Tate, & Robinson, 1984, p. 24)

Leading proponents of this form of educational facilitation, for years, have been the now-retired Dorothy Heathcote and the lecturer Gavin Bolton. Although they share some common philosophical (theoretical) frameworks on drama teaching, Heathcote's is solidly experience-derived whereas Bolton's may just as likely be derived from literature or research (respectively, Johnson & O'Neill, Dorothy Heathcote: Collected Writings on Education and Drama, 1985; Wagner, Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a Learning Medium, 1985; and Bolton, Towards a Theory of Drama in Education, 1979).

More recently, O'Neill and Lambert (1988) praised the fact that students are "able to grasp concepts, understand complex issues, solve problems and work creatively and cooperatively in drama" (p. 9). Morgan and Saxton (1988, p. v) trumpeted drama's encouragement of inquiry, exploration, cooperation, interaction, and participation. But for Augusto Boal, author of Theatre of the Oppressed (1985), the chief attraction of drama/theater is that it is a medium that belongs to everyone:

"Theater" was the people singing freely in the open air; the theatrical performance was created by and for the people. . . . It was a celebration in which all could participate freely. Then came the aristocracy and established divisions: some persons will go to the stage and only they will be able to act; the rest will remain seated, receptive, passive. (p. ix)

Boal's contention was supported by the work of Kerr and Desai separately. They each showed that drama as an instructional people's medium was (and in rural areas still is) used widely in Africa. Desai's work is "Theater as Praxis: Discursive Strategies in African Popular Theater" (1990). Kerr's investigation is entitled "Didactic Theatre in Africa" (1981).

Apart from its instructional, reflective, and other values, Postman (1990) believed that drama has the ability to make our classrooms discover the "Re-enchantment of Learning":

Where did we come from? And where are we going? And why? It gives them a sense of the future, and reasons for respecting the past. It helps them to define their problems, and directs their search for information, and therefore provides motive and guidance for how they are to educate themselves. Without such . . . education is an empty ritual, the kind of thing you find promoted in E. D. Hirsch's book Cultural Literacy.

But we know, as our youth knows, that science and technology do not and cannot provide reasons for living and learning. . . . Nor do the products of technology serve very well—. . . the thousands of toys . . . that American advertisers display as the payoffs for those who "stay in school and get a better job." (pp. 5,6)

Postman went on to say that all education should be a form of drama education because it all springs from one sort of story or another.

The idea of using story in teaching is currently very popular. Robert Coles's The Call of Stories (1989) and Kieran Egan's Teaching as Storytelling

(1986) are read widely. African-American storyteller, Jackie Torrance, opined that the use of story to spark the imagination and to teach is culturally appropriate for Black children and familiar to them.

If it had not been for storytelling, the Black family would not have survived. It was the responsibility of the Uncle Remus types to transfer philosophies, attitudes, values, and advice . . . by way of storytelling using creatures in the woods as symbols. . . . I wish you could see all my uncles and aunts when we get together and the stories come out.

Radio put technology into storytelling and made it sick. TV killed it. (Lanker, 1989, p. 125)

Cathryn Wellner (1990), another storyteller, wrote of telling stories to adolescents. They come in prepared to listen only a short while, but end up becoming captivated by humor, plot twists, and tragedy. She said, "They sense that they are receiving the gift of the storyteller's unique vision of life, given with respect for them and their own quest for meaning" (p. 119).

Students appear to accept the "gift" of the story whether it is spoken or written. Story as content and method may be particularly appropriate for teaching adolescent minority girls. They are drawn to the affective and creative and may find answers to their questions in stories that they can find nowhere else. In the controversial realm of "liberatory" or "emancipatory" teaching, stories may provide the fodder for the conscientization that is so desired. A story such as John Henrik Clarke's "The Boy Who Painted Christ Black" may illustrate as in no other way the need to "paint" one's own life, the importance of symbols and images, the oppressiveness of hegemony, victory in defeat, and the larger

concept of "little heroes." Also, biographies, autobiographies, and oral histories of Black women may successfully engage girls trapped in a patriarchal educational milieu and lead them to find voice and engage in strengthening introspection.

Poetry can be both a private and a public form of voice, depending on its purpose and its function. In this study that probes the thinking of adolescent African-American girls on the drop-out/stay-in question, it serves as a vehicle of identification with the protagonist and a measure of maturity in considering the facets of the problem. Britt (1992) wrote of poetry as a "road to understanding voice" in authors' writings. It may also be an avenue of understanding self and seeing life situations in a new way. The current popularity of Black rap and its various forms illustrates this. In The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap (1991), Spencer said that rap is the contemporary blues for the twenty-first century. As everyone knows, blues is the "poetry of the poor." The point is that urban students are familiar with poetry, and its use may greatly enhance their literacy and education in general. The popularity of Nelson and Gonzales's 1991 book, Bring the Noise, with Black youths shows this as a way to go.

Mel Glenn's poems about his high school students could begin a poetic dialogue between teacher and students. Surely, students who read the following (kind of) poem could be led to a higher level of consciousness and conversation than that developed by copy assignments, filling in the blanks, and true/false—all done as quietly as possible.

"Joy McNair"

The teachers think I'm sick
Because I always have my head down on the desk
I'm ashamed to tell them I'm just tired,
So tired I can hardly keep my eyes open.
My father skipped town when I was nine
My mother takes care of my two-year-old
And I work a full shift at McDonald's,
At night.
I'm not complaining, not that it would do much good.
But it's hard to juggle my three lives.
My adolescence was stolen from me
By promises made and then broken.
I was in such a hurry to experience life all at once.
Now I'm paying the price,
In hamburgers.

(Class Dismissed!, 1982)

As the conclusion of this literature review approaches, Robert Alexander, director of the Living Stage Theatre Company and author of Improvisational Theatre for the Classroom (1983), reminded teachers that every living person is an artist, capable of interacting with the world in a healthy, uplifting way. He believed that if each of us can discover and experience our own artistry, we will view ourselves, each other, and the world in a more positive light. He asked teachers to recognize the depth of that struggle for artistry or personhood in our students and to recognize that both teaching and poetry are best begun with the children's lives (pp. iii-16). He offered this observation on life from the poet e. e. cummings:

To be nobody but yourself
 In a world that's doing its best
 Night and day to make you into everybody else
 Means to fight the hardest battle that any human being can fight
 And never stop fighting.

In conclusion, the following article about a female high school drop-out who finally graduated appeared in the Kalamazoo Gazette on June 10, 1990: "After 21-Year Struggle, Fannie Finally Gets Her Diploma!" (p. G5). A 49-year-old African-American woman who began her education in Arkansas overcame "illness, family difficulties and all kinds of adversities" to complete her GED (Graduate Equivalency Degree) through Ann Arbor's continuing education program. She credited her teachers' patience and encouragement with getting her through. Of their student who originally dropped out in the 10th grade, they said, "She's a delight." From this vantage-point, it is apparent that America has no shining future to contemplate if too many more African-American females have to wait that long to find the financial space, personal determination, and educational support to finish a worthwhile education. (p. G5)

Perhaps the celebrated educator John Holt's deceptively simple idea of educating "everybody's children" is the most profitable direction in which education today can turn. In How Children Learn (1967), he offered this advice:

My aim . . . is not to persuade educators . . . to swap new doctrines for old, but to persuade them to LOOK at children, patiently, repeatedly, respectfully, and to hold off making theories and judgments about them until they have in their minds what most of them do not now have—a reasonably accurate model of what children are like. (p. 144)

II. The Need for Artistry: "I, That's Why"

A girl with an unusual name. A girl who re-named herself for a prominent African-American female scholar. A girl with an inheritance of creativity, responsibility, liveliness and perseverance deep within. A girl about to drop out of school. Her name is Niara. A 16-year-old African-American adolescent preparing to run for her life.

Niara feels the need to assert herself in the interests of her own well-being. She is feeling engulfed by the pressures of family responsibilities and school life, although she loves her family and values education. She knows that education has traditionally meant a chance for a more independent life for the African-American female, but feels that her experience of schooling is anything but "freeing." At times, she becomes ambivalent on the matter of remaining in school: she is aware that finishing school is considered one of the hallmarks of success. She knows that people without a diploma are probably in for a hard time of it, but she sees chronically unemployed people who have diplomas and knows some drop-outs who are "making it" OK without one.

Anyway, that's not the core of the problem, as she sees it. The issue is that the price of the diploma is too high. Too expensive in sitting still, in being kept quiet and in being told what to think.

People who know of her desire to leave school early think she is making a big mistake and are afraid for her. They wonder what will become of her. And why she thinks as she does.

Niara is not a real person, and yet she is, too. She is a composite character I created to represent the personalities, feelings, and behaviors of girls I have known in an all-Black school in a Michigan city for the past three years. She is older than those middle school girls, but is a character they can recognize and identify with. I invented Niara because my role at the school is to help

students imagine and reflect in drama class. I wanted to use her as a catalyst for learning more about how some of the girls in the school think about their schooling: whether they feel they will choose to remain in school until high school graduation or drop out before then. In effect, I wanted to know what school means to them, and why. I believed that a story about a girl similar to themselves, with some "bones to pick" about her educational milieu, would help me find out. A story that suggested the complexity of the girl and her situation with the details left for them to fill in (as they have begun to at the beginning of this introduction). My secondary purpose was to discover how closely, indeed, the students would see themselves represented in her.

The outline of Niara's story, as originally presented to the girls, contained the important aspects of the African-American worldview as I had come to understand them in my association with the students and as I live them as a sister African-American. These components of the worldview are self, family and other role models, friends, knowledge, work, God, and dreams. Niara dreamed of having a successful life and felt strong enough to achieve it. She felt burdened by a school that treated her as a child and a family that heaped too many responsibilities on her—but not on her brother. She wanted to drop out of school and get away from it all. She knew that she would have to leave home if she decided to de-enroll in school because of her parents' rule of not supporting offspring who no longer attended school and were, therefore, "grown." The thing holding her back was that she wanted her family and friends to understand. She

wanted to leave, if she could, with affectionate relationships intact. Her best friend tried to dissuade her from quitting school, her boyfriend didn't care either way, her favorite teacher was continually busy, and God was not answering her entreaties with a divine solution. She had a job already lined up and thought that, by hard work, she could become as big a success as she wanted to, even as big as another young woman in the 'hood who'd dropped out and was doing spectacularly. If. Anyway, she felt compelled to do what felt right for her.

I used Niara's quandary as the foundation of five dramas (two of them followed by poetry writing) and ten formal interviews with 18 girls at the school. The girls are eight current seventh-grade English-drama students who volunteered to participate in the study and nine eighth-grade former drama students who were expressive and insightful last year. The final eighth-grade student is an essay writer whom I mentored last year. The seventh graders constructed the five improvisational dramas and wrote the poems. The eighth graders read the outline story, answered open-ended questions about it, and predicted a future for Niara depending on whether they thought she stayed in school or not. The themes of the five dramas dealt with fleshing out Niara's personality, her building relationships with her family and friends, seeking help at school, talking to God, and meeting the young woman who is the successful local drop-out.

Nearly all the participants in the study opined that Niara's dilemma is a realistic one for contemporary Black girls about their ages. They felt that girls did

not wait until high school to think about dropping out, but made the decision in middle school or junior high unless pregnancy forced a change of plans. They agreed that, for girls for whom pregnancy is not a complicating factor, the decision to remain in school is neither causal nor automatic--it requires conscious choice. One girl, voicing her complaints against her school, stated confidently, "I know just what Niara means. This school gets on my nerves!"

"This school," Pennsylvania Street Middle School, is a sprawling one-story structure of uninspired-urban design. About 800 students are enrolled in the institution, which has a full-time staff of about 50, of whom almost half are African-American. It is a junior-high-styled middle school with class rotation and teachers who specialize in individual subjects. The school is located in a city that is characterized by a drastic manufacturing downturn in the automobile industry and resultant rampant unemployment in the entire area. Combined with the recession in the national economy, the African-American community has been hit especially hard. The majority of students at the school receive free or reduced-price lunch.

The school is one in the area that is in partnership with the Professional Development Schools (PDS) reform movement of Michigan State University. Despite this collaboration, absenteeism remains a serious problem at the school, with one-fourth to one-third of the student body missing every day. Ten percent of the students disappear from school rolls between middle school and high school, and the drop-out rate at the high school is about 20%. At Pennsylvania Street Middle School, more students failed classes last year than the previous

one, and a tremendous problem exists with unmotivated "stay-ins," students who come to school for other than academic reasons. Boys comprise the majority of both the chronic absentees and the internal drop-outs or uncommitted students, but the problem is a significant one among girls, too. The girls are less apt to be serious behavior problems, in a formal disciplinary sense, and are likely to exhibit less troublesome off-task behaviors or sit quietly and do some of the written work. Students at the school, as a whole, do not do homework. An eighth-grade science teacher who has been at the school for many years said, "I stopped assigning it because they won't do it." A seventh-grade social studies teacher who persists in giving homework says the rate of return is "very low." Just a few students return the assignment.

It appears that even students who profess an intention to remain in school and go on to college—the majority of them girls—are placing less value on being conscientious students. Many girls with the ability to do high-level work have spotty attendance and lackluster scholastic records. It is the part that the conditions of schooling play in this state of affairs that I wished to investigate by means of the Niara story. After my first year of serving as a teacher education doctoral candidate in educational drama and curriculum at the middle school with the PDS, I became alarmed that several girls I had enjoyed teaching just seemed to disappear from the school system without a trace after seventh grade. Two were said to have transferred without requesting records, two were rumored to be pregnant, and nobody knew where the other one was. Girls who were so

delightful in drama class, so verbally quick, so clever at problem solving, and so artistically able were apparently attending no further educational institution.

That second year, I began to wonder which of those seventh-grade girls would disappear and which of the eighth graders who held on would leave school between eighth and ninth grade, the transition point to the high school. About the same time, I began to discern disquieting changes in girls who had moved from seventh to eighth grade. Unhappy changes that maturation over the summer and taller frames could not account for completely. Countenances were quieter, less assertive, less full of spirit. Some were clearly depressed. Some girls appeared angry and were no longer friendly. I was well aware that life outside of school was not easy for many of these young ladies. I was also aware that it was not without peril for them inside the school as well, but the school was not as disturbed as I was by the difficulties girls faced within its walls. Few faculty members seemed to care that Jaronda had changed from a sweet seventh grader to a hostile, lashing-out eighth grader. That Melanie, last year's Miss Sunshine of my drama class, hardly smiled anymore. Others, too, hardly smiled spontaneously: you had to give them a broad smile to get a weak one in return, a sickly, detached, mouth-moving affair with no teeth. I wondered if all the changes I was noticing and documenting could be attributed entirely to life away from school. Intuitively, I didn't think so. And then I met Brenda and her friends and learned the insiders' view of things.

Beginning the first time I saw that loud, brash, suffering girl, she made an unforgettable impression on me. She entered her remedial reading class that day proclaiming her intention to "tear up" the teacher on hall duty just outside if the teacher ever hit her with the yardstick she was carrying. This eighth grader and her friends, Bette and Ninette, did no work in class that day and didn't plan to do any. That first day, Bette slept the entire period and Ninette kept up a running conversation with a classmate sitting nearby and organized folders for other students. Ninette had been one of my drama students the previous year. Although stand-offish on my initial visits to the reading class, she gradually became friendly again. Bette had younger siblings to take care of at home in the evenings because her mother is a drug addict. Allowing her to sleep in class was the only help the school had been able to give her, so far.

I usually sat near the center of the room, and each time I came, Brenda would put her desk next to mine, although she didn't say much to me directly, at first. From her vantage point there, she would spar verbally with other people. She made continual threats to boys who told her she had better get to work and would turn her head to me, smiling and showing her glorious dimples, every time she got off a clever comment at someone else's expense. Sitting side by side for several weeks, we began to talk and became friends. She would tell me prideful stories about her mother and brothers. The stories were rather inconsistent and could be termed dreams and daydreams rather than actual events.

I interviewed Brenda, Bette, and Ninette after about eight weeks for a paper I was writing on students in the school and how they compared their middle school experience to their elementary school one. During this interview, I learned that there were powerful reasons in the school setting at Pennsylvania Street Middle School to cause personality changes in its girls. They told me fondly of the elementary schools they had come from and how much they preferred them to this school. They said their elementary school teachers "took time" with them and talked to them when they'd done something wrong, rather than just punishing them all the time. The teachers here didn't care about the students, and they'd heard that the high school teachers were the same way. Teachers here didn't give them homework, and a few wouldn't let them take their books home. Brenda still missed her kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Strang, whom she remembered as being extraordinarily kind. She wished that she could have had Mrs. Strang as her teacher "all the way through high school!" There was one teacher here she did like however, Rev. Waters: "He teaches us everything, not just science and health. He talks to us and tells us things, how to behave. He teaches and preaches! He tells us to keep our clothes on and to come to his church some time."

All three girls disliked their English teacher, an unpleasant White man known throughout the building for his dislike of Blacks. He said derogatory things about Blacks to his students' faces and said he didn't try harder to be a better teacher because he "wasn't in a real school." Brenda used a lot of emphatic

body-English when she described this teacher's behavior toward the students, and it was obvious that she hated him a great deal and it was costing her to have to be in his presence every day. Her mother had told her just to "hold on," that she would find the right opportunity one day to "tell him what she thought of him." In the meantime, she and all the other students had to endure more than another semester with that hateful, baiting teacher.

I personally witnessed and heard of other abuses of students by both White and Black faculty members that went unchecked: calling the students "out of their names"—Boy, Big-Head Boy—and referring to certain girls in the presence of other faculty as "bitches." Boys in their classes often casually heaped foul-mouthed abuse on the girls, calling them "bitches" and "whores" and speaking in sexually explicit language. Other girls, in another interview, related a harrowing episode with a male African-American substitute who kept order by pulling a knife on the boys. A female African-American counselor at the school said, "The girls take a lot of abuse in this school. Whenever they complain, someone [in authority] always says, 'They must have done something.'"

It is no wonder that, exposed to such regular abuse in the learning environment, some girls harden and grow distant by eighth grade. Concerned about the unhealthy situation, I joined a committee with three other teachers to have a meeting with the principal to express our concerns about the negative treatment of girls in the school and the general inhospitability of the institution to them. A cordial African-American man, it is significant that he did not resume the

meeting later on after he was called away on other business five minutes into our conversation.

It comes as no surprise that a girl like Niara, or Brenda, decides to flee such a place. Even when unshielded abuse, discrimination, or threatened violence is not a factor, the school manages in other ways to shortchange its girls. I observed a social studies class in which the male African-American teacher punished or threatened boys for not remaining on the assigned task, but allowed girls (typically sitting on the other side of the room by choice) to do pretty much as they pleased. The girls combed their hair, passed photographs, and chatted together loudly, receiving rebukes only when they were out of their seats for more than a few seconds. I have heard a few girls complain that a couple of the male faculty members make "pets" of some of the prettier, more mature-appearing girls and give them good grades whether they do the complete classwork or not.

Brenda is apparently doing schoolwork no place at the moment. She seems to have dropped out of school. Slated to be a ninth grader at the high school this year, she evidently is not attending. A counselor at Pennsylvania Street has learned that no transfer records have been requested for her by any receiving school. My letter to her and a Christmas card received no response, although they were not returned. There is the possibility that she ran away to join her boyfriend in the East or that she is pregnant and ashamed. In any case, the school must bear some blame for the abuse she suffered there—abuse that increased her vulnerability to misfortune on the outside. By being oblivious to the

kinds of abuse she suffered in that school situation, the school is responsible for much of her failure to develop the self-respect and self-valuing (generally referred to as self-esteem) she needs in her life. In this sense, I am also considering failure to educate her beyond a fourth-grade reading level as abuse leading to underdeveloped self-valuing.

The difference between Brenda and Niara is that Niara fully believes in her ability to fashion her own life, whereas Brenda has been shown through victimization that she has little control over hers. Young females who feel such lack of control are committing suicide at an alarming rate. Suicide is the number-two killer of Black women ages 15 to 24 (Myers, 1989, pp. 136, 138), and substance abuse and other kinds of self-destructive recklessness appear to be increasing. In the midst of the national mandate to save the African-American male, the caste-related misery of his female counterpart has gone unrecognized. The girls seem to receive attention only when they become pregnant. Ignoring the plight of the potential mothers of even more Black boys who will need saving makes absolutely no sense. The females, who along with the males will be required to help rebuild the African-American community and make their contribution as citizens of this country, are, ironically, losing the personal artistry that such initiative will require in the very place that is trumpeted as having the goal of preparing them for life--their school.

The results of the "Niara study" (the analysis of the data) reveal that the process of schooling is having detrimental effects on the girls at Pennsylvania

Street Middle School in a number of ways, all pointing to the loss of personal artistry attendant upon a depersonalized educational environment. Personal artistry consists of two primary factors, creativity and choice or decision making. Creativity is the artistic or spiritual energy to be oneself and do things in a personally appropriate way. It is the inner freedom to "paint" one's own life from one's perspective. It is typified by the boy in John Henrik Clarke's short story, "The Boy Who Painted Christ Black." Although outwardly oppressed by the racist system of the South, the boy and his teacher insisted upon their right to produce a painting that reflected their lives and not that of their "masters." They fought external oppression by being inwardly free. I contend that the inner freedom of the girls at the middle school is being eroded by the abuses and insensitivities in which they are being educated; that their ability to begin emancipating themselves from the social systems in which they live is being destroyed by a school structure and pedagogies that demand female submission and conformity. While the boys are also subjected to submission, rigidity, and conformity, it is not to the same degree and is not of the same kind. They are, at least, males in a male-structured setting, but the girls are existing in that institutional world almost totally unsupported by the freedom and rights to self-growth and self-expression advocated by both African-American and white feminists. In losing creativity or inner freedom, they also lose the ability to eventually press for outer or social freedom and equality. Alarming, the inner freedom that has sustained Blacks for centuries in the face of the most venomous dehumanization (outward

oppression) appears to be diminishing in the school lives of these girls. When there is neither outer nor inner freedom, there is depression that grows into overwhelming despair, over time, and a loss of a sense of responsibility for one's own life.

The choice or decision-making component of personal artistry addresses an independence factor. It is the ability to decide many of the important things on one's life for oneself. It is the ability to not be dictated to in all aspects of life. One of the girls in the study said that Niara must learn "It's always going to be somebody over you, telling you what to do." If Niara and the other girls accept that that is pervasively true in all important arenas in life, they will be well on the road to the mental dysfunction that claims and drains the energies of tremendous numbers of African-American women. When females cannot make choices or have no voice in decisions that are essential to their well-being, "education" that aims to "improve" their lives is an impossible mission. When a girl who has to make an emergency trip to the restroom cannot do so without proving somehow, in front of the entire class, her distress, the school books can be shelved. her personal education will be remembered far longer and more significantly than any other lessons. Because the education that has formerly improved the position of the Black woman now puts her rights and natural functions in chains. The promise of education for independence now offers dependency and diminution of self instead.

In the data analysis and development of Niara's story from that analysis that follow, I will show how the education of the 18 girls in the study diminishes them through repressing the personal artistry—creativity and independence—that they need for learning and human survival. How the inner strength of these African-American girls is being sapped by a non-user-friendly institution. How, in the greatest of conspicuous ironies, a school that is being revamped to meet the needs of the future consistently undervalues the personal and cultural assets that these girls bring to the school setting—the very expressiveness, problem-solving ability, group orientation, and creative approaches that will be required in the twenty-first century. The alienation that results from such undervaluing is presented in the next section.

III. Identity and Alienation: "Like We Don't Belong Here"

Niara sat there with her arms folded. No way was she going to do this. Six old, mismatched dittoes stapled haphazardly together so they could be called an "assignment." Brady wouldn't even grade them herself, she knew. Would ask her, Niara, or another one of the "smart girls to do her work for her, again. Mark the papers, make a list of the grades, and return the papers—all with Miss Brady having no more than glanced at them. She should sneak out and go to Mr. Smith's English class. They were having a guest speaker today, somebody talking about something real that goes on outside this place.

The last time she sneaked out without a pass, she got caught by the hall guard and had to stay for after-school detention. At home, she could cook, wash, and help four nieces and nephews with their homework, but here, she couldn't do anything without raising her hand or doing an original performance to get a pass from some teacher. And she had learned to do it so well! Maybe her Oscar would be arriving soon in the mail.

S____. She was too old for this. She'd sit back here with her library book and nobody's better "get in her face" about this sad "schoolwork." 'Specially that Maceo, always looking for some excuse to "talk under her clothes." This may not be "Beverly Hills 90210," but it wasn't learning, either.

The role of victim that girls are forced to play in the school clashes with the image of increasing maturity and competence that adolescent girls are attempting to construct for themselves. The girls want to think of themselves as cared-about, capable young women from a line of women who can "do" for themselves. The less school supports them in painting this picture, the more determined most are to achieve it, and the more clashes for independence likely to occur in the classrooms. Even girls who seem to acquiesce to their victimization are alienated

from much of the schooling process. Some girls who plan to stay in school do so as "internal drop-outs"—non-drop-outs who give only enough to get by. They lend moral support to rebellious peers and sail, in some cases, close to the disciplinary limits themselves.

Last year, some of the more motivated "stay ins," girls and boys, participated in a joint meeting arranged by some of the PDS teachers at the school. One eighth-grade Honor Roll girl expressed her desire for a closer relationship with her teachers and for learning that means something to her, saying plaintively: "The teachers in elementary school treated us more like family. Why don't you share your hobbies and interests with us, so we can learn these things, too?" Comments about caring were in the preponderance at that meeting, with students protesting the rule-boundedness of the school and their feeling of anonymity. Another eighth-grade girl said she thought school counselors were supposed to "help you," but she had been at Pennsylvania Street Middle school for two years and didn't even "know the name of" her counselor.

Earlier in drama class, I had heard some of the same complaints, more colloquially put, from expressive seventh graders. LaDonna, a rapid-talking girl with expressive hands, was very displeased with Pennsylvania Street and wanted everyone to know it.

There isn't much I like about this school. I hate this school. Why? Too much violence and too many rules. A lot of people start stuff and you get kicked out of school for it. You don't really get your education because you stay kicked out.

The drama that we had been working on, an improvisation about kids remaking a school if they had three wishes, sparked other comments about the emotional unhealthiness about their actual school. Students said that Pennsylvania Street had a bad "rep" before they came there and teachers didn't "listen" to students. Ebony was a student who got along well with teachers and students in the building and didn't dislike the school. However, even she found some faults with it: "I like Pennsylvania School, but I think that some of the rules should be changed, like teachers don't listen to the whole story. They say, 'the facts,' but you can get kicked out of school for things you didn't really do." She was compelled to even defend boys who didn't go out of their way to be kind to her:

I used to like Mr. Edison a lot, but now I'm starting to not like him all that much because . . . you notice how he treat the boys--I mean, the boys are bad and all, but sometimes he's bogue to them. They don't hardly be doing nothing and he put them out of the class and tell them to stay out. He don't really give them a chance to explain themselves.

Many, many of the students' complaints were about teachers not talking with them and not listening to them. Not being listened to, in particular, seemed to signal to them their inferiority in the eyes of their teachers. In fact, in the paper that I wrote about that episode, I remarked that students used the word "listen" most often around which to center their complaints. While there is a teachers' side to this, of course, it is important to know that being listened to is an important value that students hold, and that there is no place in the organization of the

school¹ for them to tell their thoughts to their teachers on a regular basis. The subject of talk will be returned to later on in the study.

Other alienating conditions for girls at the school, expressed last year in after-drama reflections and in casual hallway conversations were the girls' restrooms and rules for usage and being taught improperly. Eighth-grade Ninette was the girl who told me her story of having to "beg" to go to the restroom in the face of an imminent disaster, with the boys laughing at her and making lewd comments as she tried to explain herself to a male teacher. That experience had soured her on almost everything that happened in school after that. Her school joys were extracurricular ones, although she mouthed the standard student mantra of planning to go to college. She was the co-captain of a winning girls' basketball team that could have been in contention for the city school championships, but the male coach was unreliable about attending practices with them and had spoiled their chances, she declared. So she didn't feel much reason to feel part of the school; she got little support from it and would give little in return, she implied. Further, making absolutely clear her belief that girls were being "mistreated" in regard to the "bathroom," she said to me one day when she was frantically trying to locate a teacher with a restroom key:

They only give us two minutes to use the bathroom! What makes them think anybody could use it in that little time? You get sent to the office, knowing that if they had to use the bathroom real bad, they'd go too. You

¹There is an advisor-advisee period once a week so that teachers and students may talk together, but the advisor is ordinarily the student's homeroom teacher, not a class instructor in the student's scholastic program.

have to go way down there and wait for a teacher to get the key to unlock the door, and how're you supposed to do all that in two minutes?!

I tried to calm Ninette down, promising to walk with her to her next class so that she would not get a "tardy." I would testify to her difficulty in obtaining a restroom key. On the way to her class together, she seethed uncommunicatively. I told her I knew that she found the bathroom rules to be unfair, but asked her if she understood, just a little, that perhaps concern for student safety was behind them. And for curtailng the penchant of some students to waste time and idle-around on a restroom pass. She gave me a long, deliberate look and summoned up what seemed to be her last ounce of patience for any adult associated with Pennsylvania Street. Over-articulating, she said slowly, "But everyone don't do that though."

LaDonna had had colorful comments on the girls' restroom situation when she vented her displeasure against the school: "They need to clean the bathroom here. It's jacked up, the pits. I feel sorry for the janitor." She said she tries to avoid using the facilities at school in the course of the day, that she waits until she gets home because the girls' restroom is usually devoid of soap and frequently of paper. And it smells bad.

Expressed feelings of victimization, degradation, and artificiality that characterize feelings of alienation on the part of girls in the school and affect the quality of student-authority relationships and male-female interactions also influence girls' relationships with each other. Etta, one of the "babies" of last year's seventh graders, a sweet-natured, plump-cheeked Cabbage Patch doll of

a girl, said the school changed her for the worse. Being a mild-mannered person when she arrived at the school, some girls didn't like her and would "pick at" her, trying to start a fight. Finally, they succeeded. With girls in the immediate area who were overhearing her conversation with me nodding their heads in agreement, she said sadly, "Before I came to Pennsylvania Street, I didn't fight nobody, but. . . ." Here, clearly, was a girl who did not want to fight but was pushed into it. Obvious, also, was the stress that having to fight in school to protect herself was causing.

Another seventh-grade girl in Etta's class who didn't want to fight transferred to another school. This talented drama and English student began complaining of illness early in the first semester. She would stay home for days, at first, and finally, weeks. Her mother grew desperate trying to find out the cause of her daughter's illness. The mother eventually learned that her daughter, Kendra, was feigning illness because she was afraid to come to school. She was afraid that a girl in her class wanted to fight with her. Conversations with teachers, the counselor, and between parents did not serve to ameliorate the situation. Despite its being shown that the girl's fears were largely groundless, the fear of having to fight caused psychosomatic illness, and she adamantly refused to return to the school.

Ebony asserted that many of the girls at the school were their own worst enemies, engaging in fights noted for their viciousness: "I wasn't here last year, but it do seem like the girls [this year] do a lot of fighting. Over some boys. That's

the most stupid. . . ." Victims fighting each other for the master's favor is a classic psychological syndrome, the "masters in this case being the boys who call the girl-victims foul names and demonstrate their feelings of superiority over them. Girls who feel the need to win the approbation of males such as these relinquish their rights to personal artistry by choosing submission to and "girlfriendship" with them at a high personal price.

I have not seen this "other curriculum" for girls addressed systematically and lengthily in the school. There have been efforts by individual teachers, however, to teach the boys to honor "their African-American women." Brenda's remedial reading teacher, an empathetic White female, brought in a male guest speaker to address the problem and showed relevant films last year. Some boys in the class proudly recited to me slogans about "the preciousness of women" that they had learned from that African-American man. His lessons may have been weakened, however, by Brenda's steadfast intent to abuse them. It may be that discussions of healthier heterosexual relationships are the focus of many of the advisor-advisee groups that I am not privy to. I have not heard that this is true. In any event, whatever is being done is not enough. In my three years at the school, what I have witnessed time and time again is individual teachers, alone, grappling with the problem. They admonish a boy, here, to be more gentlemanly and a girl, there, to have more respect for herself. They speak, roll their eyes heavenward, shake their heads, and walk away.

Girls sometimes voice their thoughts that they are cheated because of the environment in which they have to attend school. There is a closed campus--no leaving the school for lunch or for breaks--with two or more guards on duty at all times. In addition to locked, unkempt restrooms, only one water fountain is often operative for whatever percentage of the 800 students is present on a particular day. The classrooms are the smallest I have ever seen for classes of 30 or more students. When all the desks are arranged in many classrooms, there is a cramped moving-around area for everyone, including the teacher. Any student who leaves her/his seat usually disturbs others because of the lack of space. Because of the small rooms, storage space is limited, and rooms without closets (and some with) have storage cabinets and file cabinets overflowing with brown shipping cartons stacked alongside and piled on top. Female teachers manage to somehow make the clutter more attractive, but many male teachers seem oblivious to the ugliness of their classrooms and the uninvitingness of the space for motivating learning.

When I took the girls, in groups of two to four, into the most attractive room at the school, the Community Room, last year, it was the first time they had been inside the room reserved for PDS visitors and adult meetings. They were surprised, and angered, by the beautiful mauve-and-cream appointments: cream walls with decorative mauve stripe, mauve Venetian blinds, cream-and-mauve centerpieces on the tables--with color-coordinated artificial flowers. The girls were fascinated by the colorful photos and posters on the walls. Some of them

found photos of themselves taken during school events that they had never seen before. Queenie said, stricken, "The teachers have all of this because of us, but we don't," as she looked around. Later on, in the course of her group's interview about their perceptions of the school, this pretty, fashionable, large-boned, no-nonsense seventh-grade girl told me of the poor way the girls were treated at the school by almost "everyone." Extending her arms to figuratively encompass the entire room in which she was sitting, she reiterated that the Community Room was symbolic of what she was talking about—that the students, especially the girls, didn't figure very importantly in this new school. It was like, she said bitterly, "we don't belong here."

When Brenda saw the room, she "freaked out" and became very agitated. It seemed to represent to her the racial hegemony in which she lives. This girl, who at that time said she wanted to become an interior designer, declared: "Not this color! I hate this color! [I would put] pictures on the wall and not one of them a White person. White people get on my nerves. All Black." She prowled the room looking at this and that. She found a picture of herself and Bette from Twins' Day, dressed in dark matching tee-shirts with their arms around each other's shoulders. She brightened up when she saw it and asked how she could get a copy of it. What was important to her in the school setting was preeminently her friendships. Perhaps the friends and socializing become so much more important than the work to some of the girls because of their belief that the work is meaningless and unfairly presented and evaluated.

I have already mentioned that some girls say that some girls who are treated as "special" get good grades without working for them. Ivy is one girl who made that charge, and against a girl she was friends with, against the way teachers may grade unfairly, with impunity.

In our hall, the kids use their brain, but don't get credit for what [we] do. Mr. Mariage says I'm an A student, but he never gives me one. When I told him about it, he gave me another B. Yolanda was his favorite at first, and she got the A's, but she has dropped now, he says.

(This teacher had already acknowledged to me that Ivy is a "smart" student and that she was one of only two students—Ivy and Cecelia—who did the classwork and homework he assigned in voluminous amounts.) Ivy continued unhappily, "People up here tell us how dumb we are. And how people write about us. If they think about it, we're not so dumb. If they wouldn't be so hard . . . on kids, they'd learn better."

I remember being upset that this lovely child's self-esteem and faith in her abilities were being attacked in this way. Ivy was one of the girls I would have accepted unconditionally as one of my own daughters at any time. Ivy, one of the most intelligent, sensitive, and responsible students I'd taught in 17 schools in four countries.

Yolanda certainly was not "dumb," either. She is a more sophisticated-acting young lady than Ivy who seems to hold herself aloof, somewhat, from her school surroundings. She said she stopped working in Mr. Gordon's social studies class because he was so unfair, period. She said there were unannounced quizzes, tests any time "he feels like it" over material the class

hadn't covered. Her classmate, Dalya, agreed that tests should be on "something we started in school." Yolanda said there should only be "one test a week that we know about, not just any old time the teacher wants to [give one]."

For his part, the teacher, formerly an influential and successful teacher in the school district, believed he could not lower the standards of his discipline with a different kind of approach to teaching the students. This teacher, who shouted at one boy during my class observation, "Get back in here and sit down, boy, or I'll knock you down!" said the school didn't know how to teach African-American children. That the programs that did work were always pulled out of the school as soon as they showed good results. Regardless of the changes in the socioeconomic and familial circumstances of students at the school over the years, he, a medicine-gulping, burned-out Black teacher, pronounced, "I don't want them to be afraid of me, but I won't play around with grades." Grades that have some kind of meaning for him, but increasingly, as for Yolanda and others, represent their daily residence in a system that they have to fight in order to retain their self-respect.

Some students, of course, are not resisting schooling or behaving assertively out of regard for principle or personal philosophy. Some are alienated from school because they are alienated from life and/or themselves. As the late educator Patrick Daly said, they have no "peace within themselves." The girls think these students should be "put out" of school. They say that these students "rule" the teachers and should be sent to CHOICE, the district's alternative

education program for acting-out students. Even one of their male friends, a seventh grader named Jon who had no other complaints against the school, said, "This school is all right. The teachers [are] all right, too, but they do need to get some order."

When I asked students if they told their parents or other authority figures about these alienating experiences they had in school, and if so, what kind of response they received, they said:

He didn't do it to us [the knife-wielding episode by the substitute teacher]—Queenie, LaDonna, and Cecelia

I told my mother about it—Ebony

If I told my mother about it, she'd come up here—LaDonna

My mother would, too—and transfer me to another school—Queenie

We've tried to tell Mr. Charles [one of the former assistant principals], and he didn't believe us—LaDonna

They don't never believe us students; they always believe the teachers, and the teachers be lying—Cecelia, Ebony, Queenie, and LaDonna, in agreement

The picture here is one of kids against a powerful institution that does not necessarily always have their best interests at heart. Kids against unionized, tenured teachers who have more authority than their parents. These adolescents want to feel that they do not have to have their parents "taking care of" everything for them. Besides, if they do convince parents of the seriousness of certain situations at "The Penn," it would mean, in Queenie's case, having to leave new friends just as she was getting relatively adjusted to middle school. The former

assistant principal whom they mentioned was known by even some teachers for his own abusive treatment of "offenders" and was unlikely to help any student when "order" and rule-following were at stake. So, the girls' choices were to accept that they would have no recourse within the school, according to their expectations and experience, or try to transfer or prepare themselves mentally for dropping out as soon as they can.

This year, there is evidence that those who plan to try to graduate are knuckling. Last year's feisty, back-talking seventh graders are this year's resigned eighth graders, wearing the mien of depression that characterized Brenda, Ninette, and others last year and that Niara exhibited during her emotionally draining dilemma. When they each appeared in the Community Room (or school library) for the Niara study about their reasons for choosing to stay in school or to drop out, they were subdued and different. Yolanda, as the most rebellious of last year's girls, was perhaps the most strikingly different. The fashion-plate of last year's drama girls, this medium-height, medium-brown girl looked very ordinary for the first time since I've known her. Oh, she looked neat, clean, and kempt, but not with the flair that was so evident last year. Last year, it was color-coordinated, state-of-the-art fashions and a new hair-do every week. It was colored tights, a variety of teenage footwear, and a variety of silver or gold jewelry. On the day of her interview with me, she wore her hair pulled back from her face and wore no lipstick, rings, earrings, or other jewelry. She wore an attractive multicolored, patchwork-print, long-sleeved blouse and jeans. My first

guess was that the family fortunes had fallen, given the high rate of unemployment in the area. But she would still own her fashionable jewelry and clothing, I thought. But she was taller. The clothing would not be a good fit. What would have happened to the jewelry? Next, I thought that she might have "gotten religion" and was less decorative because of that. But no, she did not once refer to any new-found spirituality or "walk with the Lord," and most converted people can't keep their faith quiet. Then, I wondered if she was or had been ill. It is true that girls change, but usually toward the direction of greater feminine decorative conformity, not away from it, and I kept wondering about other explanations for Yolanda's new plainness. She didn't seem ill, but she sighed several times during the reading of the story, as if she were releasing pressure that she was laboring under. Another thing that was different was that she was nicer to me and easier to be with. We had never had any quarrels last year, but Yolanda could be prickly at times, and I was always aware that she was measuring me on some kind of subjective scale--and that I was just passing muster. She made eye contact now when she spoke and smiled, even giggled, at my silly jokes designed to relax her, or us, really, after having not been together for about eight months.

Dalya was the next surprise, or even shock. Whereas I had seen several of my former drama girls in the eighth-grade hall during this school year, I never ran across Dalya. So, when she entered with her hair pulled back in a little dry bun, I wondered what was really going on. This girl who, last year, changed her

hair style several times each day, and tinted it and "tipped it," was wearing a style as plain as an old-fashioned grandmother. Last year, she couldn't talk for giggling, but now this tall, slender, light-skinned girl entered quietly, smiled, and sat down. That was another thing—I don't think I had ever seen her actually walk before. She was formerly so full of life that she ran, flitted, or actually "sparkled" everywhere. She was incandescent and full of energy. I saw that the braces were still there as she gave me a wonderful smile and waited for me to continue speaking. Could this be the same girl who talked so much last year that she had conversations with herself because no one could get a word in edgewise? Thank goodness, I thought, for the changes maturation had wrought in this girl, but this was too much. She was too different. I was quite familiar with middle-school-age students, and they didn't change this drastically, ordinarily, from one year to the next.

LaDonna, too, had metamorphosed. Well, maybe not as much as the others, but that spark of "divine fire" in her, too, seemed to have been greatly extinguished. She was calmer, happy that I got her "out of that boring class," and seemed to need reassurances. Had I missed her? We had fun last year, didn't we? Did my older daughter (who accompanied their seventh-grade class on a field trip) still remember her? What did she say about her? She wasn't dressed as plainly as the other two girls: still wore her quota of gold rings on her left hand and now wore three earrings on each ear, a hoop and two studs. It wasn't until we started recording her open-ended responses to the story about Niara that she

seemed more like her old self--talking a mile a minute and lighting up the whole room with her dimpled, brown-face smile.

Queenie was the last of the girls who showed a remarkable difference in personality or, in her case, at least a negative difference, from last year. She was always her own person, seeming more mature and self-possessed than the other girls most of the time, even when she was laughing and talking with them. She would be having a good time, but there was never any doubt that Queenie was in control of herself and the situation. She had been a pleasant girl without being a smiler. And she was not smiling now. But this not-smiling was of a different quality: it contained wariness and weariness, too. She was beautifully turned out, as always. She was a larger-scale, dark-brown girl with a womanly attractiveness in bangs with a cascade of curls in back, and a light-blue denim pants outfit with nail-head decorations on the shirt. Her nails were the beautiful new stick-on kind painted silver with a phrase written on each one in black ink. She looked so wonderful, but seemed so unhappy or so "resigned." She didn't maintain eye contact at first when we talked, and that was definitely different. Last year, she would look anyone "down." Her manner wasn't defiant, though. Far from it. And that was the problem. Surrender, I suspected.

All of these four girls, Yolanda, Dalya, LaDonna, and Queenie, would sigh unconsciously from time to time during the interview, as if to adjust a burden. When I asked them how school was going this year, Yolanda said, "It was more interesting last year." Dalya, at the beginning of her interview, replied, "They ain't

as nice as my teachers was last year." LaDonna, full of criticisms about the school last year, said, unenthusiastically, that it was "Ok." Queenie just gave me a bored look when I asked how things were going. So I asked what they were doing in the science class the teacher had graciously let me remove her from. "Nothin," she said with an audible sigh, was going on in science. These students were clearly not having a good experience in school and were deflated because of it. They were interesting individuals in drama last year, pitting their expectations for the world against a large universe that they expected to comply with their wishes. Now, they seem like "broken-winged birds" who know, humbly, that they cannot win, even in this little part of the universe. Yolanda and LaDonna, the girls with the strongest opinions, formerly, about the deficiencies of Pennsylvania Street, thought that Niara would decide to drop out of school. Not that she should, but that she probably would. In that event, they did not predict a good future for her, though, unless or until she completed her schooling. Yolanda thought,

Her life is probably going to be very complicated, one of those hard lives with having a lot of children on ADC and everything, having no job. Um-hum, she can probably get back in school, like, when she is older and have someone to take care of her children.

LaDonna's projection of Niara's future included her dropping out of school, but returning when she "found out what it was like on her own." These two chastened rebels, LaDonna and Yolanda, bestowed upon Niara their own desire to escape school. Further, Yolanda's distaste for the role of child-nurturer (which is, perhaps, a fear of its limitations) figured into Niara's "hard" life. Once last year,

when classmate Evonne mentioned during our accentuating-the-positive sharing time at the beginning of drama that her "good news" was that her mother was pregnant, Yolanda said, dismissively, "And you're happy about that?"

Queenie thought that if Niara talked her problems over with her family, she would find the support she needed to remain in school. Dalya liked a happy ending for Niara, probably reflecting a desire for one for herself: "I think she stayed in school, got college, and got her a nice job as a lawyer or something."

The other classmates avoided answering my question about how they like school this year, and Ivy and Ebony, who are cousins, Etta, Cecelia, and Evonne appeared not to take seriously the idea that Niara would actually leave school. They seemed to interpret her nonconformist attitude as a lack of attention and understanding at home that was hindering her ability to believe in the benefits of schooling or education (they used the words synonymously). They recommended a good long talk for her, Ebony recommending a talk with mother; Cecelia, with her girlfriend; and Etta, with her mother so that she could get some help with all of her housework. Evonne believed Niara should talk with "Mrs. V," the teacher she'd always been able to talk to in the past. Ivy, too, had faith in the power of talk, with a best friend. She thought that Niara's best friend, Debra, would be the best person to give Niara emotional support and sound advice—by talking to her, doing homework with her, and helping her with her housework. Typically, however, Ivy saw the problem in a broader perspective, realizing that mere talk may be a simplistic solution to a more complex problem, that talk could be a

problem-intensifier as well as a problem-solver and that advice-givers (such as friends and teachers) should tread warily:

Well, really, you could say school is better, but if they don't want to help theyself, or, you know, stay in school and learn for theyself, you can't make 'em, you know, all you can do is give them advice. If they don't follow your advice, they just wind up on their own, anyway, and you never knew what was going on in the home, problems in the home. You're just trying to give them advice out of your, out of the top of your head.

Truette, the last of the eighth-grade girls in the study, is a second-year student, but she is not in the same "hall" or group as the other girls and was never a drama student of mine. I became acquainted with her last year when she was a seventh grader because her English teacher, Mr. Penni, was impressed by her skill in writing and wanted a mentor to encourage her. He is the teacher with whom I worked in collaboration for three years and knew that I, too, would be interested in keeping this talented girl from "falling between the cracks." This cute, smallish girl with big, expressive eyes had some companions he did not think were good for her, and she missed school too often. She wore her short brown hair in an easy style with bangs and had a lot of red lipstick on her mouth that almost overpowered the impression of her shimmering eyes. She was embarrassed, but pleased, by my interest. Since she was already proving to be school-shy to some degree, I made the arrangement a casual one: she would write and I would read. She wrote essays whenever they "came" to her, so she did not write regularly. I tried to see her every week, just to let her know I was there, without pressuring her unduly because I could see a skittishness in her during one or two brief conversations in the school library.

Outside of her assignments for English, Truette wrote only two or three essays, but she expressed her point of view unmistakably and organized her material in a compelling way. One of her pieces was an argument against Blacks serving in the Gulf War, and another one was advice to people her age, warning them against the dangers of peer pressure. In that essay, she advised against not staying in school and other perils of African-American oppressed consciousness. I typed the monologue for her, had it run on colored paper and laminated. She said she hung it on her wall. I am reproducing the full text below in preparation for a discussion of how Truette became alienated from the school emotionally, a tragic study in contrasts. Truette is one girl who surely can understand Niara's negativity at not having voice and power in her surroundings.

If you are a teenager, chances are that you are being or have been pressured by your friends into doing something you never thought you'd do. They are just people who are out looking for a good time, and they don't stop to think of who they hurt until it's too late. Real friends don't push you into doing something that could kill you or hurt you mentally, physically or socially.

Although there is more than just one kind of pressure, the one that I think is the hardest and most stressful of all is teen pressure. I hope you agree with me because it's plain to see that the Black teenagers today feel they have something to prove to one another. But really, they don't have anything to prove except that they can finish school and get an education, because that's where it all is. There is no future for you if you don't plan to educate yourself because drugs are definitely not the answer to getting paid.

Sex is another very dangerous game nowadays. You have to be sure of who you're with because people are just going out there and having sex like it's a sport. They don't stop to think of what could happen afterwards. If you're going to have sex, especially you young teenagers, use protection because there are too many of us Black people dying already. We don't need to make matters worse than they already are.

Truette is one of the oldest girls in the study, and her writing somewhat reflects this. She will be 16 years old one month after the end of the school year, whereas some of the other eighth-grade girls are approaching their fourteenth and fifteenth birthdays. The picture that we see of Truette from her essay is of a girl who is racially and socially conscientized and who looks to education to make things better. She is also nonjudgmental about sexual mores of the young. She believes in saving oneself through thinking.

It was not this cautionary but open-minded person whom I saw at school this year. Eyes that used to shimmer now glower with barely suppressed aggression, and a mind that used to craft fine essays no longer uses this creative outlet. Truette kept missing school last year until, near the end of the year, she was hardly in attendance at all. She came under notice of the school office. Since she was not an acting-out student in the usual disciplinary sense, she was retained in the school rather than being sent to CHOICE, the program for kids whose disruptive behaviors preclude their being kept by their home schools. At Pennsylvania Street, she was placed in the AEP class, the Alternative Education Program, a small class of about a dozen students in which students with problems thought to be remedial can be rehabilitated. The teacher of the class is a hard-working professional who is obviously fond of the students in the class and devoted to their "making it" after they leave the program. But Truette, she says, is "something else." Truette has been her most difficult student this year. She is insolent, uncommunicative, and unmotivated. She blames her parents for

granting permission for her to be in the special class, and blames both her parents and the school for holding discussions "behind her back," giving her no final say in the matter of this year's placement.

She told me, one day in the hall, that they had her "locked up," away from her friends. She said the class was too small, "not enough people," and was a bad idea. I had been noticing her in the seventh-grade hall during class-changing and had been pleased to see her. I gave her smiles, but hadn't gotten in return one of the dazzling, long-lashed ones she was known for. In fact, she just barely spoke to me, nodding her head in recognition but averting her eyes. When I did find the opportunity to, literally, corner her for a "hot minute," I was shocked at the intensity of her anger. When I saw it, I well believed, later on, the stories that Truette's teacher told me about her mouthiness and defiance. Clearly, she was tolerating my friendliness because of our good relationship the previous year, but I didn't kid myself that that currency would buy much in the way of closeness to the present Truette.

Once she had been shockingly rude to her AEP teacher in front of her parents. Concerned about Truette's increasing unreachability, she had made another home visit to parents whom she always found cooperative. Truette came home and found her there. Threateningly, she demanded to know, "What'd I tell you about making these pop-calls?" The parents were embarrassed, and Truette's father promised to beat her, but she didn't back down. Maybe she thought return-humiliation was fair. I could tell she was embarrassed not to be

with her friends during the day every time I saw her during passing. She would try to "hide" herself within the group, as if reluctant to have some "unsafe" person know of her plight, call to her and perhaps ask where she'd been keeping herself. She seemed to hug the walls as she walked and sidled around corners, a fugitive from the "lock-up" in "The Penn." She seldom was in the center of the hall, laughing and calling out loudly to her many friends, as she did last year.

She said that she didn't write any more, that she "didn't have anything to say." She, like Yolanda and LaDonna, thought Niara would drop out of school. Only she had no condemnation or dire predictions should Niara choose that course of action, saying of Niara's future life, "Probably normal, a regular life. Not a high-paying job, a regular job. Something like that."

The difference between her response and those of LaDonna and Yolanda appears to be their degree of rebelliousness against the "system" that is making all three of them dissatisfied with school. The vociferous anti-Penn attitudes of LaDonna and Yolanda are flickering out, whatever they still feel within. But Truette, having been done a greater "wrong," in her mind, is vitriolic. At 15, she is a year older than Yolanda and two years older than LaDonna, and was of a more independent mind to begin with. She and Ivy are about equally insightful about the social context of their lives, I learned last year from Ivy's drama improvisations and Truette's writing, but one has chosen to try to succeed within the educational system, at great cost to self, while the other one seems emotionally ready to drop out. Why does one girl choose one course and the

other the opposite? The answers are speculative, of course, since (as Ivy says) we do not know the home situations. What is nonspeculative is that Ivy gets at least some rewards from being in school: she is an Honor Roll student, received her certificate in a well-attended parent-teacher ceremony last year, and seems to identify with her mother, who has some college education, having attended Michigan State University for a while. In fact, one of her concerns for Niara's dropping out is that she would not be able to "teach" her own children properly.

What also is nonspeculative is that Truette, for all her ability, does not identify closely with the aims of the school. She is older and requires more freedom than she is allowed in that setting. Her role models and friends are outside the school, and her parents are not educated people, but yet they are doing OK. Since thinking for self is one of her most inviolable "rules," following it, at this school, will lead her right out the door. She sees school simply as a way to possible employment, nothing more (except the opportunity it provides her to be with some of her friends): "She [Niara] don't want to go to school, yet she want a career. You don't get no jobs as it is, so. . . ."

This girl's anger at her powerlessness, voicelessness, and lack of respect in school are causing her to pay scant attention to other outlets for her artistry--her ability to be creative, forceful, and independent in her writing. In congruence with this paper's concept of repressed artistry, emotional turmoil generated by the school setting has rendered her independence null and void and her future personal creativity a question mark. It may be argued that the school was acting

for her benefit, for a greater good than a 15 year old can appreciate, and that would be true, as far as it goes. What was not considered was a more empathetic approach to Truette's truancy: hourly check-in, mentoring partnerships, temporary out-of-school placement, and so on. Anyone who knows her in the school could have predicted, somewhat, this reaction from her by keeping her in the same building as her school friends, but separating her from them. And those of us who did know her last year are sick with fear that Truette may not find that nondestructive, unique place within herself again after the end of this school year. This past year, she was effectively an in-school drop-out. How conducive will the high school be--a larger, more impersonal place than Penn Street, with even more problems--in reversing this metamorphosis of a bright Black girl growing up (to put it colloquially) on Trouble Street today?

Each year, in drama class, and in the school as a whole, more troubled students develop, students in need of more "emotional space," students who cannot easily tolerate being ground down into nobodyhood. From seventh-grade drama the first year, Jaronda and Melanie had the "change-over," or school-influenced personality change. From last year's seventh-grade girls, there are Yolanda, LaDonna, Dalya, and Queenie. And Ebony, Ivy, Etta, Evonne, and Cecelia may be mentioned as girls whose changes have been a more subtle movement from seventh-grade mouthiness to eighth-grade meekness, exactly the sort of "space" accommodation that is contrary to the needs of the adolescent psyche, and their self-image as capable, important young women growing

towards adulthood. And, of course, Truette, in a category by herself as a seventh grader last year, and Brenda and Ninette, who were in eighth grade. Bette's home problems were so great that school probably could not have been too big a factor in her developing personality. Besides, she slept her way through it as much as possible.

Still, the almost "clean sweep" is more complicated than it seems. Despite the abuse and insensitivity in the structure of the school, a few girls did become more, what may be termed healthy in interpersonal relationships. After spending last year as separate social isolates, Cecelia and Evonne have made friends this year and have developed more self-confidence in the social area. This is probably the reason that they actually now appear to be the most emotionally healthy of all the eighth graders in the study--they are happy having friends, despite everything else. Last year's Evonne was a meek girl who never looked you in the eye when she spoke. She wore shiny goop on her hair, a lot of red lipstick, and did not dress as well as the other girls. She was the older sister of many younger siblings and seemed to enjoy this role (she is the girl who was happy that her mother was going to have another baby). We did a drama once called "Home," in which a mother was protesting having to stay at home to take care of her husband's aged father. The other girls (alternating as the lead) were adamant that they wanted to resume their career and not play nursemaid any longer. "Dad" could go into a rest home. Evonne was the only girl who said quietly, "I'll take care of him."

She simply was not in sync with the other girls. She seemed to concentrate her efforts, therefore, on making friends with the boys. She brought a bag of candy to school each day and put it on top of her desk. Boys would come by and take a piece as she giggled gratefully. She was pleased even when they helped themselves to her very last piece. But, over the summer, she grew noticeably taller and no longer stoops in an effort to remain in the background. She walks tall, has adopted a simple, attractive hairdo, and is just plain pretty. Yolanda, Ebony, and others report that she no longer allows herself to be taken advantage of by the boys in her classes—that, in fact, there is one she "beats up" regularly. I saw her in the hall one day and told her what a knock-out she is. Obviously delighted to be attractive and noticed, she eagerly told me that she has three girlfriends now, and the pure joy in her voice was unmistakable.

Cecelia is a girl I felt very sorry for last year. Not even the boys were her "friends," and she suffered a lot of social hardship for being an unpopular person. She was not a disagreeable girl, but she was serious about getting an education and didn't mix well. Her clothes were simple jeans and tops, never anything fancy, so she dressed better than Evonne, but just as different from the others, in a way. She sat by herself in every class and at lunch. Some teachers saw her isolation and paid her special attention because of it, but it lasted all year. In two classes I observed, she sat in the exact middle of the room, between the "girls' rows" and the "boys' rows"—neither with the girls nor with the boys. Alone. In social studies, she did sit with Ivy sometimes because the two of them were the

only ones who took the assignments seriously. Beyond that, I never saw her with anyone, except in drama, where everyone has to work in a group.

In one example of the kind of thing Cecelia had to endure, a delinquent boy in math class took her seat away in a particularly mean manner. The boy, Jordan, was known for throwing his weight around and was frequently suspended from school. When he was there, he quarreled until he got tired and went to sleep. No one woke him when he fell asleep; they were too grateful for the peace. Anyway, Cecelia had arrived in class early and had put her math book and some other supplies on a seat near the front of the room where Ivy and some other kids who would do the work usually sat. I was interested in this because I had never seen Cecelia make a gesture in anyone's direction to show that she'd like to be included or accepted, even where there was little likelihood of a rebuff on their part. The group of "workers" began to assemble as the class hour grew near. Jordan came in, looked for a place to sit, and decided on Cecelia's seat. Without hesitation, he knocked her things to the floor, as if his show of bad manners were customary, and sat down and looked into space. When Cecelia came in, a terribly hurt look spread over her face as she saw what he had done. In the hubbub of the beginning of class, I did not notice anyone else who noticed what Jordan did. But even if they had, it was not probable that anyone would have words with him if they could avoid it. With tears in her eyes, Cecelia picked up her scattered pencils and rulers and textbook and fled to a seat at the opposite side of the room.

I told the teacher what Jordan had done because I was starting to fear for Cecelia's mental health. The teacher, Mr. Roosevelt, joked around with her and tried to kid her back into a better frame of mind all through the class hour. Jordan had gone to sleep, sucking his thumb, and I guess there was nothing to be done about him just then.

Before the end of the school year, Cecelia had a "victory" that helped to compensate for the rest of her school year. In the school library, with all the other seventh- and eighth-grade "team" winners (winners from groups of classes in the same hall) there, she won the school spelling bee. Never was there a happier young lady! She smiled and smiled as she received congratulations from people who were in the audience, smiles from deep within that I doubt if anyone at Penn Street had ever suspected could be there. She and I both cried, and she let me give her a big bear hug. Her English teacher, Mr. Penni, was in charge of the event and told Cecelia how proud he was of her. I began to think that the child might actually burst from the sheer ecstasy of winning once.

This year at school, she has looked like the model that Mr. Roosevelt said she could become. She has a slender, long neck accentuated by a loosely curling hair style. She also has a slight, young-lady figure that looks striking in anything she wears. Probably because of the two friends she has now, she said that Niara should talk her problems over with her best friend. Cecelia is still wary of uncertain situations at school and is apt to play it safer than most other girls. For example, if she is directly behind me in the lunch line, she will not speak to

me, as most of the other girls would (frequently asking to borrow a quarter for more fries). She will invariably wait until I notice her and speak a greeting. She then appears happy that I am the same and will tell me that she's doing OK and will share some news if she has any. She is planning to be a professional artist—thereby making sure that a significant amount of her personal artistry emerges intact from the school experience.

There are more girls in my drama class with preexisting problems this year. Fiona angrily dropped out of the group of girls who had agreed to participate in the Niara study during the very first drama. We all were mystified as to what the trouble could be, but she is now speaking to me again—resuming our pleasantries as abruptly as she ended them. Althea became so consistently wild each time she was exposed to the spaciousness of the wide auditorium stage in what she took for "play school" rather than artistic learning, I did not ask her to take part in the study. Jimmi is reported by wags in her neighborhood to be promiscuous and is verifiably seeing a psychiatrist. Kelly's extreme quietness is termed weirdness by her English teacher, and she has practically no friends or associates in her class or the school except for Mary, who seems to have deserted her in her pursuit of boys. Mary seems to have no particular emotional problems, but just became too interested in chasing boys all down the halls and hitting them, to want to be around a bunch of females. So, that left eight seventh-grade girls to take part in the five Niara dramas over five double periods. Eight girls, the majority of whom appear to be emotionally health—for now.

In this seventh-grade drama "troupe," Jimmi and Dawn are the acknowledged leaders. Michelle, Rakeeta, and Deirdre comprise a sort of second tier in terms of imagination, creativity, and participation, as well as in general popularity with their peers in the group. Kelly and Mary were the next in personal "presence" and influence, but when Mary did not continue in the study, that left Kelly somewhat an isolate. Whitnee is not associated with any one particular group of girls. She is imaginative and outspoken in drama and fits in everyone's group and in no one's. She does not seem to know that she is accepted only marginally by other girls sometimes, and she appears not to care what they think of her. These girls identified with Niara to varying degrees, as did the eighth-grade girls who participated in the story-response part of the study. In general, they felt that Niara's story is a realistic portrayal of a modern African-American girl's struggle around the issue of remaining in school or not.

In the first drama, "Niara, Her Own Self," we established who Niara is and what her relationships are with others. There was round condemnation of a family that would put so much work on the daughter and not on the son. In the introductory phase of the drama, the girls nodded their heads vigorously when I asked if they'd feel as put-upon and resentful as Niara does. Jimmi, never slow to express her personal feelings on any subject, and to express them vividly, spoke of her domestic situation being analogous to Niara's.

It's 11 people that live in my house and I'm the only girl besides my lil niece, Karol, and it doesn't make sense that I've got to wash all them dishes. They ain't even got that many dishes in the White House. They be in the kitchen and I just leave.

The girls hoped that Niara would be able to find a way to stay in school, but did not blame her for feeling that she had to get out from under the pressure at home—even if it did mean leaving school. It was just simply too unfair to be tolerated any longer. Deirdre said, "I think she a girl that like to get her education, but she's tired of it [the home and school situations]. I don't blame her."

For these seventh-grade girls, "fairness" is a supreme value, worth going to any lengths to secure. It is for this reason they championed Niara's "rights" more vigorously than the eighth-grade girls did. The eighth-grade girls had generally come to believe in conciliation and negotiation for Niara to use in improving her situation. The seventh-grade girls, in keeping with their age and newness to the school, saw the situation in terms of fairly uncomplicated right and wrong, of cease and desist. Cookie expressed their point of view: "She should tell 'em she's . . . she's getting tired of washing and cleaning, and doing all of that at the same time [that she's going to school]. She should say the boy do the stuff she do!" Yes, said Whitnee, but "should" isn't necessarily the real world: "Once my mother told my brother to clean up the house, and he ran away." Agreeing with Cookie, Dawn said, "But if the boy live by hisself, he's gonna have to learn responsibility. [But] the old people, and some people now still think the wife is going to do it for him." Jimmi, again, in disgust: "Them male chauvinist pigs who think women should do all that. If it was me, I'd straight out 'trip' on 'em!!!"

Agreeing that no one in his right mind would put all that "women's work" on Jimmi (and thereby cause her to throw an angry fit), we turned to the matter

of Niara's boyfriend, Jawan. The girls felt that, if he really cared about her, he would encourage her to stay in school rather than just withdraw from the issue until she made her decision because, according to Jimmi and Cookie,

Jimmi: No matter what, because these days, you can't get nothing without an education.

Cookie: Sho can't!

Cookie did allow that getting an education was not a matter of just attending school—that you have to do something, only some people act like they don't know that: "They don't be doing nothing. They just be sitting there." That's because, interjected Jimmi, some kids have other reasons for coming to school, like she did one day recently:

OK, say this morning. I got on the school bus to come to school, but I didn't make it to school. I made it to school, but I didn't make it to class. I went somewhere else. They come to school to skip school because they know they can't stay at home because of their parents.

I suggested that we were talking about students who were students in name only, who were actually another kind of drop-out. Cookie then told us about her cousin, who is a chronic truant.

My cousin, I swear she ain't been to school none this year. She just don't—one day her mama walked her all up in here to her class and sat with her for an hour. Then her mama left, and she left, too [as soon as she could].

We agreed that Niara wasn't similar to that particular girl in her attitude toward school. Niara would come and stay, but she found a lot of things wrong with how she was treated at school—and at home. Dawn then suggested that Niara's problem was a family problem because it involved all the people in her

home. Michelle, Rakeeta, Deirdre, and Jimmi thought it was more the girl's problem, or a gender issue, because, according to Jimmi, who spoke for them (and who was very interested in her rights and Niara's rights): "It seems like the boys get more privileges than the girls. They get to do more stuff than the girls do, and the girls start getting kind of angry and the pressure be on them over pregnancy, AIDS, sex, and all that stuff." Dawn suggested that the unequal situation occurs because families are more fearful for their daughters: "More than their sons. 'Cause they think the girl is more weaker than the boy." Cookie said that is why some girls skip school, because they never get out of the house otherwise. Still in the vein of not excusing Niara's parents but trying to understand their treatment of their daughter as opposed to that of their son, Whitnee declared, "I think the parents have more pressure on the girl because they know the girl gotta bring home what she do on the street, but the boy can leave it out there."

This matter of a girl's rights is an important one, then, for these girls--a complex (and sometimes dangerous) one. In trying to educate Niara, the school disregarded or trampled over her rights. In trying to protect her and keep her out of trouble, parents also failed to acknowledge her rights, and in doing so, they appeared to favor the son over the daughter. And now, in an attempt to right the wrongs done to her, Niara was about to embark on a course perhaps the most hazardous of all. What is fair? What is Niara's place in the scheme of things?

Some girls, Deirdre in particular, thought that Niara's favorite teacher, Mrs. Varnette, might be able to help her find that place. Or she might be able to take Niara away from her family and rear her as her own daughter, similar to what happened in the movie "Lean on Me." ("I love that movie," she said.) A few girls thought the teacher might be more kind and understanding to Niara than anyone else. She could go stay with other relatives, such as grandparents, someone else suggested. The story said that Niara tried praying because so many people she knew said it worked. The girls agreed that she should try it, but with certain conditions, as we shall see in the next section.

Interestingly, although these girls are all wrapped up in their own friends and do not even want to leave the room on a pass without one of their friends accompanying them, they did not think that Niara's friend, Debra, could do much except give moral support and lend a sympathetic ear. This problem was over her head, although two eighth-grade girls, Cecelia and Evonne, didn't think so.

Now that we had begun to understand who Niara is, I wanted the girls to think even more deeply about her, to "reflect" on what would be helpful to her in her present dilemma and offer some tentative advice (which they could change later on, depending on how their understanding of her changed). I told them no paper and pencil and to try to separate their own ideas from those of others (particularly those of Jimmi since her ideas tended to be very influential in the group. During the Niara study, I often asked her to hold back her "fire" until everyone else had spoken because of the persuasiveness of her comments. She

understood and cooperated). If they were truly going to assist Niara, they must give her the benefit of their own best thinking. If they wanted to help this alienated young sister, they had to give her their best shot. (Jimmi went first this time because she had to leave for an appointment.)

Jimmi: What would I say to convince her to stay in school? I would tell her maybe she won't be as lucky as Debra's sister, 'cause maybe Debra's sister had some money put away, so when she got ready to drop out of school to get her own house and car. . . . Maybe she won't be as lucky and'll end up selling drugs, getting robbed, and just getting strung out on drugs and stuff. And, if that wouldn't convince her, I'll tell her that she can't do nothing without an education, 'cause her dreams may not be what she wants them to be, and if she did have dreams to be a doctor or something, she couldn't do that without an education.

Rakeeta: The best advice I can give her is to say that if she stays in school, it'll pay off in the end.

Dawn: She might not be able to get no money for a house when she grow up. [Pause] I say, if she drop out of school, her parents, if she need some money to back her up, her parents won't lend her non 'cause she wouldn't stay in school.

Kelly: There's no reason for her to drop out. She's only got a couple more years.

Whitnee: I'd tell her she have only two choices: drop out or stay in, then give all the good things she could do if she stay in, in school.

Mary: She should go on and stay in school 'cause that's about the only way she's going to get something, is to stay in school.

Deirdre: I say stay in school 'cause she only got two years left. Then when she get her education, go to college, when she get out of school, she have a good diploma or degree and she can get a job and get her own house and her own car and do what she want.

Michelle: I would tell her to stay in school because, um, she shouldn't let her mother and brothers and sisters and nieces and all them get on her nerves and stuff like that.

Cookie: She should get out of there [her home] and go someplace else. She could finish school then.

What is striking in the girls' comments is the fact that Niara's schooling seems to have little intrinsic worth for these students; its value is as a medium of exchange. Time served in exchange for material goods and freedom. It is easy to be alienated from an institution that has only a modicum of personal value for you. An institution that is a bridge to "someplace" else, "someplace" much more desirable. When Deirdre speaks of "education," and when Jimmi does, they are speaking of the credentialing function of education, the education-for-making-a-living role over the education-for-living one. Education that is not connected with their lives, that even in its reform concept is a process of doing better on tests, of "measuring up," does not command active involvement, loyalty, or respect from them. "Education" that focuses on their culture--who they are--(in the main) once a year may mandate the presence of their bodies, but not of active cognitive/intellectual involvement. Niara was feeling the pressure of such an education—one that was not a good "fit" with the person she felt herself to be, and the girls understand that. But they think that having her "stick it out" will be to her benefit in the end, regardless of how hard things are for her now. And, besides, education does serve some purposes they take personally and deem important in the here and now. Every single thing about school was not about delayed gratification: they could see their friends there, learn enough to help their siblings with their homework, and, one of the best things according to Deirdre, is to "look

at those eighth-grade boys! Sorry, Miss . . . but I do; sometimes all I come for is to look at them (Ha! Ha! Ha!)."

That humorous interjection led us to our next drama activity. The task was for the girls in partners, as the friends, Niara and Debra, to try to think of three reasons so important that they would make anyone stop and think about remaining in school, three "universals" not previously mentioned. Each time Niara tried to bring Debra around to her point of view, Debra was to reason with or lay one of these on her. Universally important reasons they came up with are:

1. You can teach other kids or help your friends.
2. You can make your parents proud of you.
3. You can pass (an opportunity for succeeding).
4. You can learn things you don't know.
5. You can sometimes make learning fun.
6. You can meet people.
7. You can do interesting things.
8. You can help people to keep their confidence in you.

The list of eight all-important advantages of going to school (getting an education) was distilled from the arguments. Half way through, I had the girls reverse sides and argue fervently for something they had just been against. They began to see Niara's quandary in greater depth. Dropping out of school could be a hard decision because more than one person was involved. Were parents who worked hard, sacrificing, wrong to want this one little dream come true—their child

graduating from school? On the other hand, your parents do not own you, and it is your life. What about the brothers and sisters who come after you? Might your dropping out influence them adversely? How much do you owe your parents, the rest of your family, and yourself? They began to understand that education serves functions other than job-winning and that its pursuit thrusts you into roles other than that of student. And that even when it doesn't do all they want it to, it may still have some positive purposes. Niara had a right to think the way she did, and other people have the right to think the way they do, too. It's when the "rights" cross that things begin to go wrong.

This section on alienation and identity has been about the cost of education to the girls at Pennsylvania Street Middle School who took part in this study. It has been about the high price of schooling in terms of voicelessness, powerlessness, and lack of being respected, in both the perspective of the girls and a few adults on the staff who are sensitive to their plight. From the voicelessness, powerlessness, and lack of respect come concomitant ills: lack of perceived value in their schooling, excessive subjectivity on the part of some teachers, delayed gratification and present dissatisfaction, lack of affect and personalization in the school environment, pressure over being at odds with self, and lack of time taken for talking and interpersonal dealings (between teachers and girls). Other shortcomings that the seventh and eighth graders discern derive mainly from the foregoing factors. Artificiality of the curriculum and structure is a prime example. The girls want "realness" and connection, but find male-

structured abuse and disconnection practically everywhere from their values, their elementary school experiences, and their needs as developing adolescent young women. Through responding to another girl's story in interviews and drama, the girls have been able to look more deeply into the issue of staying in school or dropping out, a subject that is individually and group-relevant to African-American people, always. They have begun to know Niara and themselves better.

As alienation works insidiously to stifle creativity and personhood, important parts of the impulse for artistry in these girls, the students' personalities change from the seventh to the eighth grade. Girls become less spirited, outgoing, and vocal. Much of the casual noise that they make, ineffective in an empowerment sense, may be termed silent loquacity—noise without depth in order to cover pain of oppression and depression.

The school does not know how these female students feel. In the course of its daily activity in a difficult enterprise (limited budget, too many discipline problems, interactions with other social institutions, little active parent support, coordination and collaboration with MSU, to name a few), it believes it is fair to all its students within the parameters of its responsibility. Because of its daily association with some level of the local criminal justice system, it believes that the emphasis on trying to save the young African-American male is a correct one. A few girls do become pregnant, but nowhere near the numbers of males from the school who are incarcerated periodically or who have juvenile court records.

In making an alliance with MSU, the school believes that it is making a positive move to better the welfare of all its students. Girls who do not respond to these changed academic emphases on deeper thinking in their subjects can see their counselor, one of the two female assistant principals, or a sympathetic teacher if personal problems are causing interference with learning. The school understands its role to be that of scholastic service to seventh- and eighth-grade students, not social work. In any case, there is a social worker on staff (and MSU graduate interns) and a home-school liaison worker. Any teacher may use the proper channels and refer students to these professionals for help. The position seems to be that some problems that affect only girls are developmental ones and will become less serious in the natural course of time.

In the next section, independence and recognition will be discussed in further explanation of the artistry-limiting effects of the girls' schooling. The lack of independence and recognition within the school environment will be seen to add to the internal oppression or stifled creativity of an impersonal education. The place of God in the girls' quest for independence will also be discussed according to data from the study, along with the correlates (connection, meaning, and respect) of independence.

IV. Independence and Recognition: "Say My NAME!"

It was the midnight hour. She was in turmoil. She had been praying and praying. Some people got such relief and peace from talking to God, but she hadn't gotten any. And no answers, either. Either God was very busy somewhere else, or He just wasn't interested, because she had put in so many calls. Didn't He know her name?

She asked Him every morning and evening: "What should I do? Keep on going to school or drop out and be on my own? You know what I have suffered. What is your plan for my life?" She asked repeatedly for a sign, any kind of sign she could follow, and the strength to follow it. She was living under such a strain now, thinking the exact opposite of her family and friends, knowing they all thought she'd lost her mind. She felt herself unraveling: since she was a little child, she had always been able to make her own decisions and stick with them. Now, she was at an impasse. Just the sort of thing she was afraid would happen to her if she remained in that school—depending on someone else to think for her. Maybe this is what she got for "playing" with God before. Maybe real conversion did make a difference. She had "been to the water," baptized, but knew in her heart that she wasn't "saved" at that time.

But now she wanted God to truly save her, save her so that she could realize her dreams. One of her dreams was to stop "living for the city." She wanted, simply, to get free one day soon. Of too many rules, of too many "musts," of too many violent, deadly voices. She wasn't stupid. She knew a girl alone would be consumed by the sharks out there before too long. She was going to work just long enough to buy herself a ticket and a present for Mamaw. She was going back to green grass, birds that still sang, and softer faces. She was going back down South. She couldn't tell her parents because to them, going back would mean they failed in "The Promised Land." But she could never be a success here. Her soul was in the South. Maybe that was where God lived, too. She kind of thought so.

Both groups of girls, the drama students and the interview students, readily understood Niara's action of "turning her problem over to the Lord" when she had wrestled with it as long and as hard as she could. That seemed to be the predominant thing they understand about a personal relationship with God. That He helps those who undertake to help themselves—a "praise the Lord and pass the ammunition" sort of God, not a champion of meek psalm-singers, nor one who floats around sprinkling free happy-dust from on high on cowering people. Theirs is a God of sweaty muscles and working-class shoulders. A deity in their own image and an ever-present guide in times of trouble. An almost-flesh freedom-fighter. Most of the girls in the study say they pray regularly and/or are "saved" (renewed or "born again" people). This means they think of themselves as important, God-esteemed people worthy of His attention. Therefore, they do not doubt that God will help Niara through this soul-searching time if she approaches Him "right." But what constitutes a correct approach to an emancipatory God? The seventh graders, in their second drama, "Testifyin'," thought that acknowledged belief did, sort of "owning up" to the existence of a higher power. Whitnee said that everybody believes in God to some extent, whether they know it consciously or not. And, "seconded" by others, she said that if you think you don't believe, God is going to show you that you need to. "If you don't believe in God, God gonna make a way for you to believe in Him."

Various eighth-grade girls said substantially what the seventh graders did, that real belief is needed when communicating with God:

Ebony: She gotta believe in Him. . . . She can't be saying a prayer and doubting, saying I really know it ain't going to happen. She got to believe.

Etta: [She has to] keep on praying.

Ivy: I'd keep on believing in Him. I'd think God is feeling sorry. He's listening, but [He knows] it's mainly my decision.

Yolanda: I think He does [care]; He just taking His time helping her out. Just showing her.

Evonne: If she trust in Him and believe, He'll help her.

LaDonna: [Maybe] she don't have faith.

Dalya says she prays, herself, but didn't know why Niara wasn't getting an answer. Cecelia, with her customary "school radar" in place, was wary of answering questions about God in school and demurred. Truette, at first hesitantly, and then boldly, said she doesn't pray and implied by her dismissive shift of the eyes that, for Niara, it will be futile also.

In the church drama, Niara attended a service because she was so confused over what she was going to do. She hoped that from the testimony of believers, she would become more sensitive to intuition and spiritual "signs" and choose the correct path for her life. The seventh-grade girls, in-role as members of the "congregation," stood and testified to miracles that God had performed for them and others. He had found jobs in unlikely places, had healed hopeless cases, and had bestowed money in the darkest hour. They felt that Niara (a shadow-character in the scene and not represented by a player) could be very assured by that testimony meeting. However, as soon as the congregation crossed the symbolic threshold to the outside, the now-present Niara character

was assailed by doubts about the authenticity of the testimonies she'd just heard and was uncertain once more as to her imminent course of action. Perhaps the "miracles" were coincidences; she had seen no evidence. Perhaps only crazy people believed in the unseen, after all. In her state of near-despair, she decided to give God one more chance. She wrote Him a letter. Here is Kelly's letter to God in the role of Niara:

Dear God,

I went to church today. When the people got up and testified, I believed there was hope. I'm so frustrated. I need to make a choice, but I can't make up my mind. That's why I went to church. I started to change my mind [during the service], but when [some] people said it wasn't you, I believed them.

When I would pray, you didn't answer me. I'm still confused and don't know what to do. I keep waiting for you to give me a signal, but I think you gave up on me. Is there really a God, or have I been praying for nothing? Have I testified to strange people and made a fool out of myself?

Please help me make my decision before my family drives me crazy. I'm so confused, I feel like I am running out of time. So, if there is a God,

Help me please!

Love, Niara

The letters were in keeping with the developing story-line of the two dramas as the girls imagined Niara's situation. Some girls cast their letters in terms of Niara's school problems, if that was on their mind, and two girls situated theirs in family problems. On the reverse side of these letters (as themselves), the girls wrote a description of the God they know. The descriptions included Dawn's Sunday School portrait of someone in a white robe and sandals (she is

a minister's daughter and very involved in church activities); Cookie's picture of someone loitering around, waiting to help you if you are serious (about getting His kind of help); and Whitnee's portrayal of God as an eternal friend "who is always on your side." Kelly's God is presented below.

I think God is a spirit who created the world and made us. He cannot be seen. He is the one who lets us live everyday. He is not human; He is a spirit whom [sic] we should praise because He gave us life. He knows everything you do or say or what you're going to do.

The girls' attitudes during the testimony-meeting scene, with Whitnee as sister-pastor, had been casual, and the back-sliding "reversion" scene that followed just outside the church-house door was even humorous. But the contrast in atmosphere when the girls wrote their letters to God and described Him was startling. When they sat writing in various positions across the stage and widely scattered seats in the audience section, you could have heard a pin drop in that large, near-empty auditorium. Their behavior said this was important to them. Following this individual writing activity, the girls were to, as partners, switch out of role from their Niara character. As themselves, they were to make a list of the ten most important things to ask God for. Dawn wanted to continue the writing as an individual activity, and there being no objections, they did. As before, they wrote intensely and in absolute silence. In the following partial summary of their "top ten," their requests have been categorized:

1. Food and shelter for their families and "the homeless."
2. Long life for mother and parent-figures.
3. A healthy, love-filled life for self.

4. Strength to make their lives "worth something" through education and other efforts.
5. Recognition of their talents and abilities.
6. The desire to stay close to God.
7. A good family in their adult lives—husband and children.

They presented their lists as kinds of initiatives or independences they wished for their lives, things they wanted to be free to make happen.

I saw in their lists a stark contrast between how they see themselves and how their school regards them. They see themselves as promising (or artistic) young ladies worthy to correspond with the highest power¹ in the universe, but the school sees them as juveniles needing other-culture topics and drills to learn from, for the most part, and as rowdies needing to be held in check until they are calmed in school-approved ways. The school's superior ability to force its side of the argument results in proud girls having to "bite the bullet" of an education that is largely incongruent with their needs, their thinking, their feelings, and the value they place on themselves. In the process of trying to provide a common school education under a narrow paradigm of education, educational authorities make it harder for the students to learn and the teachers to teach. Resistance of students to the process and their alienation from it result in a rule-bound environment that progressively impersonalizes interactions. Overlooked is one

¹Even for girls whose inclinations are not strongly religious or spiritual, in either group, I believe this pride of independence holds true because it comes to them through the ontology of their African-American culture.

obvious mediator or ameliorator of a lose-lose situation: some student-decided curriculum that focuses on their questions about real life outside the school, their lives.

I agree with the teacher who said, "I never saw a child who didn't want to learn." The trick is to get closer to what the child wants to know and the teacher needs to teach. Considering the intense interest of the seventh-grade girls as they immersed themselves in a two-pronged situation--Niara's life and theirs--that seems the place where at least some of the efforts at school reform at Pennsylvania Street Middle School should be focused, on connections in learning. Look at how the material and method had a self-disciplining effect on the students, how many connections now may be made to current events, essays, poetry, stories, and biography and autobiography. Also, math connections about drop-out statistics and demographics. Think how many connections and contrasts the drama students and the interview students could make between Niara's developmental and political quest for greater independence (and their own) by using the following poem by Mel Glenn (1982) about one of his female Hispanic students.

"Donna Vasquez"

My friend Anna tells me to stay in school
 But I don't see how I'm gonna make it.
 I tried, man, but it's no good.
 Maybe I can't be smart with the books.
Qué va?--What does it matter?
 All that readin' just wastes my time
 When I can be out makin' money.

I love fixin' people's hair,
 The way it is in fashion magazines.
 I work part-time and my boss is proud of me.
 Anna tells me to stick it out.
 That I only have a little ways to go.
 But it's no good.
 When I'm in school, they make me feel like a child.
 ("Do that again and you'll get another zero.")
 When I'm working,
 When I'm out in the real world,
 I feel like a woman.
Lo siento—I'm sorry, Anna; it's no good.
 I'll do your hair for graduation.

Donna Vasquez left school because the connections were not being made between school and her life—she saw school as being about books, not life, and believed that her time was being wasted. Like the girls who long to be more independent or free at Penn Street, she didn't find meaning ("What does it matter?") in the school environment. She found it after school hours.

As questions, connections, and meaning (in their neglect) caused Anna and Niara to feel childish and overly dependent on the teacher, they eventually drove both girls, for not entirely dissimilar personal reasons, to the brink of leaving. Meanings, importances, and connections were all the property of the teacher in their teacher-centered educations. You could be right or wrong at the whim of a teacher ("get another zero"), an unmotivating circumstance that Ivy mentioned and Brenda alluded to earlier. Teacher control of all the important correlates of independence, and therefore of learning (because learning is a volitional act; absolutely NO grand design for schooling can make disenfranchised kids learn), means the alienation of students. Teacher-centering and alienation

mean school failure for students whose interpretive frame is different from the teacher's (read "the school's").

Need- and personality-generated questions, life connections, and encoded meaning are functions of learning style as well as of independence, per se. To pursue their artistry, to seek to know who they are and who they will become, the girls must know how to learn and how they learn best, since learning is a continual growth process through life and does not end with formal schooling. John Holt talked of the importance of children finding their own best ways of learning in How Children Learn (1967), and this philosophy of learning has since been advocated by progressive, holistic, and feminist educators. Belenky (1986) has been at pains to show that females, in general, learn differently or "know" differently from males—that "connected knowing" is characteristic of females.

In a lesson that the field of education should have learned from, Herndon (1968) described what it is like for African-American children who exist in a depersonalized, powerless, meaningless, other-culture learning setting:

Some kids can't take it as well as others. Some kids can't stand there calmly while they talk to the flag. . . . Or they can in kindergarten . . . but they can't keep it up in the fourth or seventh grade. . . . Sitting in a classroom . . . pretending to "study" a badly written text full of false information . . . being bottled up for seven hours a day in a place where you decide nothing, having your success or failure depend, a hundred times a day, on the plan, invention, and whim of someone else, being put in a position where most of your real desires are not only ignored but actively penalized, undertaking nothing for its own sake but only for the illusory carrot of the future—maybe you can do it, and maybe you can't, but either way, it's probably done you some harm. (p. 197)

The "illusory carrot of the future" is a time-control device that also takes away the students' independence and makes them victims rather than beneficiaries of their education. Because if what is important is future time and not present time, the teacher and school are its custodians. Present time belongs to the students, but it is judged less important than the future for which students are being "prepared." The following poem was inspired by the silently protesting eyes of a student I glimpsed momentarily through a partially open door as I passed through the halls of Penn Street one afternoon. The eyes were those of a proud captive fighting back.

What's in it for me?
 No, I don't mean an eventual job at SDI
 Or some place where there's pie in the sky.
 What's in it for me right now?
 What's it have to do with my life?
 Well, understanding it by and by
 Is why
 I'm not gonna let you waste my time
 Today.

African-American educational leaders and cultural-congruency advocates believe that greater self-respect and scholastic achievement will emanate from more independent conditions of learning on the part of children. Although the African-American leaders are usually addressing the problem of school failure in Black boys, there is no reason to think that Black girls would benefit less from more student-centered, child-sensitive methods and materials. In fact, since, at Pennsylvania Street Middle School, girls receive virtually no special attention whatsoever, there is every reason to think that any attention they would receive

in the area of more independent designs in learning (student strategies, organization, participation, goals and institutional philosophy, frameworks, methods, and staff reeducation) would be beneficial.

In my work in drama with Penn Street students over the last three years, I have seen how enthusiastically both genders, but particularly the girls, respond to less teacher-centered (more student-independent), more democratic means of learning. Improvisational educational drama, by its philosophy of encouraging and accepting student thinking, enhances the girls' further thinking and builds their confidence. Equally important, the approach, as both content and method, respects the students for who they are and what they bring to the learning situation. In vignettes of three seventh-grade drama students, I want to show how important a feeling of independence and its correlates are to the girls, personally and intellectually. I shall begin with my most fascinating student this year, Jimmi.

Jimmi

Jimmi is one of the quickest, brightest students I've encountered over a long career, but she must be interacted with carefully. She is gregarious and creative in a way that reminds me of Truette when she was in seventh grade, but is probably already further down the road to serious anti-social behavior than Truette was then. From my first acquaintance with her, I knew this was an independent young lady, not about to be controlled by the rules of others. I knew this because our beginning was not a good one.

The entire class of seventh-grade English-drama students was assembled in the school foyer earlier this year, awaiting the bus that would take them to a theater production away from the school. I was accompanying Mr. Penni and the students. As we waited, he reminded them of manners and good behavior. I spied a student openly listening to a transistor radio, although a firm rule of the excursion was that such an item was not to be brought. I looked at her, "eyeing" her to put it away, but she ignored me. I caught Mr. Penni's eye and pointed to the girl. He went over and spoke a few words to her, and she turned and glared at me. A few girls near her also rolled resentful eyes in my direction. It was clear that they felt I had no right to interfere in their affairs.

These were some of the students whom I had not yet taught in drama. The way we were doing it this year was in thirds of the class. Rather than doing a weekly rotation of students as I did last year, I was teaching each group for three weeks and then taking a new one in the rotation cycle. In this way, I was trying for more continuity and depth in each group's work. Having already taught two-thirds of the students, those students did not think me interfering to have a say about a broken rule. However, the ones I'd not yet taught took it very personally. Some girls (to whom I'd not said a word) muttered a few unclear resentments in my direction, and we boarded the bus with those attitudes in the air. Jimmi, a medium-sized, light-skinned girl, would flash her eyes at me periodically on the bus trip and make sure the radio was visible.

At the theater, another teacher, whom she knew from church, took it away from her. She resisted, but not a lot. The implication was clear: she granted authority the right to discipline her, according to whether there were prior acquaintance and good relations. This is true of other students at Pennsylvania Street, too, but not to such an extreme.

After the outing (which was largely successful), Mr. Penni and I discussed Jimmi's behavior. He told me that she is a "moody, bright, disruptive" student. She could spoil any class she chose to, and her relationships with her teachers were not the best. However, she knew a great deal that other students didn't seem to (he wasn't sure if by reading or by teaching of adults away from school) and had a good grasp of the interconnectedness of many things. He suspected problems in the home. He said that my encounter with her was typical because she didn't seem to think the school rules applied to her and had once mentioned a "tyranny of teachers." If she had no "say" in them, they were not "her" rules.

Two weeks later, it was her group's turn to come to drama. I smiled, welcomed them, began a "circle" (the opening formation in which we share "good news" with the group and do necessary prior thinking in regard to the day's improvisations), and explained the way that we did drama. I told them about their opinions not being "wrong," about the need for listening and courtesy, and that I would not provide "answers" for them that they could find out for themselves, and that, indeed, there were sometimes no easy answers to certain problems and situations. I told them that the purpose of drama is to use our imaginations to

further our thinking, and that I would participate in the dramas with them, but would accept only a low-key, nonauthoritarian role.

I watched Jimmi from the corner of my eye as I said these things. I could tell she was getting "hooked," but was resisting. She was the first one to ask questions--predictably, about the rules. Did she understand correctly that there were only two rules? she challenged, to (a) be courteous to everyone at all times and (b) to listen when someone is speaking? Well, yes, I said, but there was a third one that I'd better add right now (considering the crowd), and that is that no one in our stories could be killed off--that we couldn't solve our problems by killing people. Aha, she seemed to say, and then, "Any others?" I said "no" in the face of her disbelief, and we began to construct a world in which "Courage Is the Key," one in which courage has many definitions and actualizations--and problems, of course. (They had been prepared for this drama by their teacher when they read "Showdown on the Tundra" in their Scott, Foresman English text.) We were going to see if average people exhibited bravery in the course of ordinary living, and if so, how.

It was a wonderful drama session. The students took to this form of experiential learning like the proverbial ducks to water. They worked together to create a conflictual situation in the neighborhood that would be difficult to resolve. Jimmi had many good ideas, and they seemed to be overpowering those of the other students, but I let that go for now. It was slightly more important at the outset to have Jimmi's cooperation and enthusiasm. She appeared flushed with

excitement at the end of the hour, tinges of pink showing through her yellow-brown complexion. I dismissed the other students and asked to speak with her.

I told her I was glad she had decided to participate in the class (participation is actually voluntary, but the power and personal applicability of the work keep most students coming after they have taken part once). I told her I was impressed by her work and looked forward to learning more of her ideas. Then I apologized to her for the way the incident about the radio happened on field-trip day. I told her I knew she didn't know me at the time and had a right to wonder who this person was who commented on her behavior. But, I told her, I wasn't apologizing for trying to obtain adherence to the rule because she shouldn't have had the radio in the first place. I made a comical face as I said this last part and gave her my raised-eyebrow, wise-woman look. I couldn't give any more ground than that, or this girl would not respect me, and I'd already had evidence of how she responded to someone she had no regard for.

She gave a little giggle in agreement and told me she "was sorry," too. And, to show she was an honorable person, she told me she "wouldn't chew gum in [my] class no more." We both laughed at that because, obviously, I had seen her mouth going many miles a minute as she chomped ceaselessly during "circle," just defying me to say something about it to her. I didn't rise (or sink) to the bait, and now we had negotiated a peace pact. According to what Mr. Penni had said about her, I didn't know if she'd be able to keep our agreement, but at least the old stuff was behind us. And her sense of volition was intact.

When I formed a girls-only troupe to further my investigations about how the girls in the school were perceiving certain things in their schooling milieu, I mainly sought volunteers from Jimmi's group because they worked exceptionally well together, were articulate, and showed excellent imagination in thinking of different ways to conceptualize a problem. And because I felt Jimmi's perspectives were needed. She was a great asset to it. As I mentioned before, I sometimes had to whisper to her to let other girls take the lead because of her powerful influence and compelling ideas. The other girls seldom seemed to resent her assertiveness in pressing forward her ideas. In fact, after she had held forth on "male chauvinist pigs," Niara's boyfriend, and the general domestic unfairness to Niara during our first discussion of Niara's story (when the other girls were just beginning to imagine "who" she is), Deirdre said to her, "Why are you so smart?" The other girls nodded their concurrence that she is, indeed, "smart."

No doubt, some of Jimmi's facility with the character Niara was due to Jimmi's sympathy for and/or identification with a girl who, like herself, found herself having to fight for fairness at home and at school. It was obvious that she admired her for standing up for herself. But she also was able to "size up" the other characters in Niara's story early on the boyfriend, the teacher, the girlfriend, the parents, and the brother (of course). She was able to find parallels, as when she likened Niara's situation to a similar one in the movie "Lean on Me," and contrasts when she talked about in-school drop-outs who are different from Niara and who are "just taking up space. . . . They come on the fourth Friday so the

school can get some money." She was talking about the official enrollment-count day, and how rough a time Penn Street would give students who don't even show up then. She could illustrate her points with colloquial stories, as when she told us about students "who come to school to skip school," and would clarify ideas for others when she arrived at an understanding before they did.

She did not do these things in what would be considered good school decorum, though. Even in drama, where hand-raising for a turn to speak is not done, her expressiveness in using body movements to accent her points and her responsive speech to bolster the spoken opinions of others ("tell it, girl"), sometimes had to be calmed down. In fact, many of my notes to myself after class were about how to better manage the permissiveness that Jimmi and Deirdre (another "live wire") needed in order to participate and learn.

Jimmi would complain of headaches frequently and put her head down on a table without notice in the middle of planning, discussion, or after-drama reflection. I would want to have her input in some particular part of the conversation and would find her uncommunicative. Saying, "Jimmi? Oh, another headache? Sorry, let us know when you can join us again," I would entertain someone else's thoughts. A few minutes later, Jimmi would usually be "well" enough to participate again. She might have actually had headaches, but what is more likely is that she needed the brief time-out or the special attention. Perhaps, given her history of clashes with authority and her psychiatric therapy, she still needed to ascertain that the choice to participate was still hers. She

never had more than one or two of these bouts in a class period, and our working around them allowed her to participate when she could or would. I am sure that questioning the legitimacy of her headaches or requesting her participation in a way that she would interpret as a demand would have been counterproductive.

In any case, when she did rejoin us, it was a treat for everyone. She did remarkable work in creating the personality of Deshonna, the neighborhood drop-out who was doing very well. In "The Party," the idea that I provided the girls with to improvise the drama upon was this:

Niara's best friend is Debra, and Debra's sister, Deshonna, is the neighborhood drop-out who made good. She has bought her second new car in less than a year and has moved into a bigger house. To celebrate, she has invited all the neighborhood girls and their boyfriends to a big party at her new place this coming week-end. She promises to have fantastic food and the best deejay in town.

The lead-in questions that we considered briefly were:

1. What does Niara think about this party? Will her parents let her attend it?
2. How will meeting Deshonna affect Niara's plans to stay in school or drop out?
3. What reasons besides the stated one might Deshonna have for giving the party?
4. What do the neighborhood parents think about the prospect of such a party?
5. How did Deshonna get her money?
6. Why didn't she invite her own friends?
7. What are the security arrangements for the party?

These questions were developed jointly by the girls and me as the important ones to consider within the drama framework. The question about security was their suggestion.

Jimmi and the other girls thought that the party would be a housewarming occasion, and Jimmi voted herself Deshonna, as I thought she would. Since the character Deshonna was new in the Niara saga and the other girls hadn't conceptualized her well as yet, Jimmi eagerly stepped into the uncertainty with her customary self-assurance. The other girls, particularly her friend Dawn, developed a devilish, let's-give-her-hell look. Deshonna would have to be quick on her mental feet in this drama. I could hear whispered plotting as chairs were moved about the stage to create the entrance to Deshonna's mansion.

The girls challenged Jimmi as Deshonna to describe her mansion to them. She said, gesturing widely and speaking rhythmically, "I got a gold chandelier in my living room; I got "The Thinker," that statue in my living room, a big ole curio cabinet with china." The rest couldn't restrain themselves:

Dawn: It got a Jacuzzi! It got a swimming pool in the backyard and then she got a patio and she got all that other junk in the backyard.

Michelle: She got good china. . . .

Rakeeta: It's got an entertainment thing [center].

Cookie: She got a queen-size bed in every room.

Whitnee: Ten rooms!

Michelle: It got three floors.

Kelly: A lot of fancy bathrooms.

Jimmi took over again with:

OK, I got the front with, uh, them little wooden fences that come by your house, and I got a rosebush going up it (Trellis? Yes, that's what it's called.) Yeah, then I got this rose garden, then I got my beautiful flowers, then I got my bushes, my hedges trimmed down.

The girls said, "Whooooo!" approvingly. She was standing up to their challenge.

To finish setting the scene, the girls decided that Deshonna's house would have an elevator, an entertainment floor (instead of just a console area), a ballroom, and doormen. In this first scene, it can be seen how "Deshonna" continues to hold her own creatively. Whenever she gives the girls as good as she gets, they recognize her for it, and it adds to the enjoyment and thinking of everyone, rather than being a disruption or detraction.

The girls go about the stage "admiring" what they can see of Deshonna's layout from the exterior. They are exclaiming in "Ooohhs" and "Aaahhs."

Jimmi: Ok, ring doorbell.

Jimmi (in role as Deshonna): I would like to greet everybody. . . .

Dawn: We still outside! [Girls laugh.] You didn't invite us in yet!

Girls ring doorbell again: Ringggg! Ding-dong! Ding!

Deshonna: (I only got one doorbell.) Welcome to my house. Just leave your coats over there with the boy. I'd like to greet everyone to my party. We have food in the . . . lounge. You need anything, just ask--[To me, "What's your name?"]--Shirley, my maid. Don't touch none of the antiques. You don't have this where you come from.

Dawn then proceeded to ask a lot of "dumb country-cousin" questions.

Deshonna answered that, no, they could not "play" in her penthouse elevator nor enter her ballroom without the "proper attire" and looked them over appraisingly.

Dawn was Niara as the action continued and asked to speak to Deshonna privately. Inside Deshonna's office, Niara asked her how she'd been able to amass such a large amount of goods so quickly. Deshonna replied, "First, I started selling drugs. And then, I stopped selling . . . and put my money in the bank and started to invest it."

We paused there for a mid-drama reflection and talked about the morality of throwing--and attending--a party that is financed by drug money. Some girls thought it was wrong and, as mothers in the next scene, would refuse to let their girls go, on that basis. Jimmi said the question wasn't so much right or wrong as "life." How was Niara going to learn about life if she was continually "shut up" in the house?

Back in-role, Niara and Deshonna continued their heart-to-heart:

Cookie as Niara this time: Why did you drop out of school in the first place?

Deshonna: I dropped out of school because [they] was pressuring me too much and I was pregnant at the time. Yes, I would encourage my kids to stay in school, 'cause I'm all torn up about this. . . . I have a job now and I'm going to get my GED. . . . I thought about it, but I'm too young to have kids.

In-role (and however projective her in-role comments were of her actual feelings), Jimmi was willing to conform as long as she was allowed her rebellion first. Things that might have been shocking for her to say in the classroom were not shocking in drama and did not meet with disapproval. Therefore, she had her little verbal rebellion with being a drug dealer and leaving school pregnant (these realities occur in the school but are not talked about openly, in my experience

there), and then began to take the role more seriously. She said that a boy she knew had gotten her started on selling drugs (in-role as Deshonna) and that it was a "terrible feeling" she'd never like to repeat—being used that way.

Being independent of some of the teacher's usual authority allowed Jimmi to have fun at the teacher's expense (by making me her maid) and to pursue her considerable talent in improvisation. It also helped her keep the troupe very committed to a worthwhile learning experience that covered moral, social, and personal issues. By receiving recognition from her peers (and less importantly, her teacher)—highly important at 13 years old—she was encouraged to do an even better job of "out-thinking" them and fleshing out her character.

Independence inclinations are manifested differently in the next student we shall focus on, Whitnee. But the freedom to be who she is in the school setting and to think her own thoughts is essential to her intellectual growth and mental well-being, also.

Whitnee

Whitnee is our little church-lady. She is the conspicuously saved person in the drama group. When I first saw her and spoke to her in the English classroom, something about her friendly assuredness told me she is "saved." She is friends with no one in particular, but is friendly with everyone. She works well with anyone, but has her own ideas. She appreciates a good joke, but becomes quiet when the other girls get a little too rambunctious. When Jimmi and Deirdre talk about boys in a way that implies intimacy, she looks at them in

wonder but does not proselytize. She was the natural choice to play sister-pastor in the "Testifyin'" drama.

This slender girl with an Oriental-esque slant to her eyes assumed her podium with a practiced air that spoke of familiarity and probably church-youth leadership. It is interesting that Dawn is an actual preacher's daughter, but it is Whitnee who characterizes church citizenship. Dawn is a tactful, secular diplomat at school, whereas Whitnee is an easy-going saint trying to get along in a world she never made. The girls seem to respect her personality and ideas. In addition to the religious aspect of her make-up, she is an intelligent girl who asks good questions and, in drama discussions and scenes, has a way of succinctly stating what we are about (as when she summarized the arguments the girls had been having about parent favoritism to boys over girls by reminding us that parents have to be more vigilant over their girls' social life because girls bring home babies and boys don't).

It would seem difficult and unfair for a girl who is as devout as Whitnee to have to "leave her religion behind" in the course of the school day and to have to leave her church leadership role for that of bossed-about student during the week. Because, unlike Cecelia in the interview, she wants to talk about her beliefs in some way in the process of acquiring her education. When the students, as Niara, wrote letters to God, she waxed the most metaphysically, or at least spiritually, of all:

I don't even know who I really [am]. Sometimes I imagine I am a black cloud in the brightest sky, with birds chirping or just hanging down from an

old chinaberry tree. I don't want to take responsibility before I am grown. I want to wait until I can look deep inside of me in that black cloud and pull the real me out.

Not one of Whitnee's ten wishes was for a material thing. She asked things for other people and expressed a wish to render service to others. Here is her list:

1. I'll ask God to help me stay in the name of Jesus Christ.
2. I'll ask God to give me strength and pride.
3. I'll ask God to help my family.
4. I'll ask God to help my grandmothers live to get 300 years old.
5. I'll ask God to help people choose the right answers.
6. I'll ask God to watch over us night and day.
7. I'll ask God to help the sick and shut-in.
8. I'll ask God to help the people who need money, clothes, shoes, etc.
9. I'll ask God to always be by our side.
10. I'll ask God to help us learn to get along with those of another color.

It would be easy to dismiss Whitnee's writings as those of a church-brainwashed child, but it must be remembered that the other girls go to church, too, and do not speak as ardently of God as Whitnee does. Probably, in the future, these views will be changed somewhat to accommodate growing awareness of many new things, but for now (and perhaps for always), her leanings are spiritual. They are who she is today. How sad that there is no place in school, usually, to discuss such powerful leanings. I have known many such

children like Whitnee in various schools; they are not a lunatic fringe, nor are they misguided people. In fact, they are often some of the most emotionally healthy students in the school, possessing a sound dose of self-esteem and hope for the future.

According to an article by Gill and Thornton (1989), the majority of students who profess religious beliefs were found to be quite healthy: "Where strong commitment exists, one may successfully override the tide of environmental influences, as was demonstrated by the [students] in the secular public school who dared trust "God" in a crisis" (p. 59). The independence to freely state one's beliefs without fear of ridicule or censure and positive recognition for having them have enhanced Whitnee's learning and that of her class insofar as she interacts with them. There were smiles when Whitnee read her "top ten" requests to us; one or two were smiles of tolerance, but they were mostly smiles of acceptance.

The last student whom I shall present here is one who is only passively accepted by the other girls; she is not rejected, but neither is she part of casual things in the English-drama class that are not work connected. She is a girl different from Jimmi and Whitnee, but one who expresses a need to be more independent in her relationships and would benefit from having more voice in her education. This student is Kelly.

Kelly

Kelly is a quiet, shy girl of mixed race. Her mother is White and her father Black. She lives with her mother and does not know her dad, but would like to

meet him. As I mentioned before, Mary is her friend, but when Mary is not around, Kelly is pretty much isolated from the others socially. Kelly is a short girl with glasses, who looks more Black than she does White. My feeling is that the other girls would accept her if she made gestures in their direction, but she seemingly cannot bring herself to do that. She enjoys being around the group liveliness, I believe, and does join in some of the laughter, which is good for her. However, she withdraws into herself at times and is regarded by others at those times as somewhat strange. You will recall that her English teacher felt she is "weird" upon occasion.

Having more decisions to make about her educational activities on a daily basis may contribute to "bringing" Kelly "out" to some extent, and she has written of wanting more freedom at home. In her top ten wishes to God, she wrote:

1. For my grandmother to quit instigating and worrying about the way I dress or fix my hair.
2. For my mom to quit drinking and smoking.
3. To always have friends.
4. To see my dad someday.
5. To have a successful life and have an education.
6. For my talent to be recognized and to support my family if they need help.
7. To bless everybody and give my family long life.
8. To help the homeless.

9. To have enough money, all of us.
10. To stop being so shy and have a boyfriend.

I asked Kelly what her talent is (mentioned in her #6), thinking she'd say writing because she has good skills and has written some good stories and poems in drama. To my surprise, she said singing is her talent. I asked what kind of music she likes to sing, and she said popular songs. As we were talking, the other girls drifted our way to hear about this unexpected, unknown side of this classmate. One of the girls, Dawn, I think, said, "Sing something." I cringed inside, thinking how this shy child had been put on the spot, and tried to think of some way out for her. To my absolute surprise, this young lady who finds conversation difficult began, in a soft, shaky voice, to sing Whitney Houston's "I'll Always Love You." Everyone was dumbfounded and stood or sat perfectly still until she'd finished. They gave her a polite round of applause and nice, genuine smiles.

Unless a student like Kelly has some say (or choice) in some of her educational activities and some freedom to be herself in the course of the school day, such desires and talents will remain hidden. She must really want to be a singer badly, to sing "cold turkey" a capella before eight people she is usually afraid to talk in front of. Now, by encouraging independent thought, deeds, and words on her part, Penn Street could help give her the confidence she needs to become one some day. It could give her the independent space and recognition she needs to pursue her art and her artistry.

In the foregoing discussion of the need of Jimmi, Whitnee, and Kelly for more independence in their schooling, recognition was almost as important to the girls' actions as more volitional, empowered beings. When I recognized Jimmi's right to become affronted by the discipline of a stranger and her right to come to drama or refuse, I was acknowledging her as an independent person, not just a "schoolgirl" with programmed feelings and attitudes. My recognition of her thus motivated her to cooperate with me, knowing that everything wouldn't be entirely on my terms. When Whitnee can freely ask questions about the bigger questions of life in school and can speak openly about her God (who, in her words, is "magnificent!") in school, her education truly begins where she is—the goal that education set for itself eons ago, but has never seriously achieved—and can proceed from there. Also, she will be much more emotionally or mentally healthy than a girl who has to wear a false face during the day (five days a week times months times years) or stifle one of the most signal parts of her personality. And to reiterate about Kelly: less shyness and greater empowerment will come from having some independence in choice making, decision making, and no-saying in her school experience.

What must be remembered is that African-American girls of middle-school age are likely to be less cloistered than other girls their age are if the African-American adolescents are from a low-income home. Like Niara, many of them have numerous domestic responsibilities that are essential to the running of that home. Girls like Evonne have been taking care of other children since they were

little children themselves. Many girls who are irregular school attenders are absent because of responsibilities at home. When Bette's brother and sisters come home from school, Bette is sister and parent, all rolled into one.

Black mothers have always worked outside the home in order to make ends meet, and their children have had to look after themselves and cook and clean house until mother could be at home. Therefore, the high rate of teen pregnancy should be no surprise, nor the fact that children who are the boss for a significant portion of time after school object to being over-bossed or silenced in school. Niara's feelings of rebellion are realistic in such a context.

Many of these girls are longing for recognition and attention in school. In illustration of this, I remember the response of the drama troupe to my explanation of the rights of subjects in a study (such as I was proposing to conduct)—their need to assent, the necessity for parents to consent, the understanding that they could withdraw from the study at any time. I then informed them about confidentiality and the fact that no one reading my study would be able to attribute statements to actual girls at Pennsylvania Street Middle School. "What?" said Dawn, with acute disappointment in her voice; "You're not going to say my name????!"

Several of the others felt the same way, so to placate them, I let them spend the remaining ten minutes or so of class listening to themselves perform some earlier work. They sat in a circle around the tape-recorder that was on a piano bench in the middle of the auditorium stage. Some put their feet up on

chairs. They all sat there with absurdly pleased looks on their young faces, as if making even that feeble mark on the world was an occasion of joy.

For its part, Penn Street could now say that I have underestimated the difficulty and complexity of running a school for 800 young people in a community plagued with unemployment and all the other typical urban-neighborhood ills. That the school is not a "male-structured" institution because it has two female assistant principals this year. It might also say that these girls' problems are largely unamenable to schoolhouse remedies because of their homes and community and that the school's mandate is to teach them, not "raise 'em," in the words of one Penn Street teacher, a male science teacher. It could also stress that teachers are not educated or trained to teach and relate to students in the ways illustrated (or advocated) by this treatise. Additionally, it may feel that the local African-American community would not support these newer, holistic approaches, preferring instead a test- and jobs-oriented approach that would ensure that more of its youngsters enter the working world eventually. And that theirs is largely the approach advocated by the school district policies, over which Pennsylvania Street Middle School has no influence.

My reply to the school is, first, that the problems it just identified in self-defense cannot be even approached for solutions under the present operating paradigm or mindset. What is needed is for the school to reconceptualize its mission from a transmissive to a transformative one: to realize that its proper work is that of helping students to make a life and a living, rather than to just

make a living. That what will be needed in the future years are people who can think flexibly and who are highly adaptable; people-workers who have the creative turn of mind and the inclination toward independence-within-the-group (the artistry) that these girls already have. When the end goal of more transformatively educated students is established, small, logical steps leading to the goal, or reasoning backwards to the steps necessary to make that happen, can commence.

Second, the school is a difficult and complex place to run, but with clearer goals that specifically identify empowerment of female students, the complication of conflicting goals and school-generated discipline and attrition problems will be significantly ameliorated (as they apply to girls at the school). As these goals will necessarily include the education of boys in respectful, cooperative interactions with females, they will improve the general climate of the school.

Third, the presence of female administrators in a male-dominated institution does not mean that it is less male-centered. It may mean that two more females have been permitted to study male-administered authority up close. The school principal is a male, as is the chief schools' administrator, and the system operates largely in the old line-and-staff structure without the benefit of newer, less old-boy configurations of school-based management, team spirit, and female equality. Both of the new female administrators are very concerned about the progress and "place" of girls in the school, but are so overwhelmingly busy that they hardly have time to act upon these sympathies or empathies.

Fourth, there are successful school-reform models that incorporate the active voice of girls within their structure. There are workshops that address the issue all over the country. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) published in 1992 its report on How Schools Shortchange Girls. Various educational writers who write in the feminist vein have suggested ways of helping girls in school realize their full potential. And one of the best resources possible is right there in the neighborhood: African-American mothers who want the best for their children. They are employed, unemployed, career and welfare mothers who have survived in the world and can offer advice and support both to the school and to girl mentees. The information that can facilitate rethinking and reordering is there for the asking. All that is necessary is that the school realize that there are highly important reasons to ask.

Fifth, many schools are working on the reeducation of their teaching staffs. In conjunction with university teacher education programs and without them, teachers are learning collaboration, multiculturalism, conversational methods, arts-integrated approaches, the power of story and biography in learning (the teachers' own and the students'), participatory/experiential frameworks, drama and simulation advantages, and so on. Some schools decide on an approach and contract with consultants; some send teams of teachers to learn new approaches and come back and teach others; some schools use inservice activities during the school year; some districts send as many school staff (teaching and support) as possible to summer workshops. And some schools

have made a commitment to hire only replacement teachers who are schooled in the newer methods and new ways of thinking about teacher-student relationships and roles (new "edu-think," as it were). Again, reeducation, although slow and fraught with the usual obstacles associated with change, is possible and extremely necessary. The thing is to begin—to construct a common, inclusionary vision and aggressively strategize the time and steps necessary to make the vision a reality. Some schools/school districts have found that many worthwhile changes do not require massive infusions of new revenue, that a reordering of goals and priorities made better use of resources that already existed.

Sixth, the African-American community wants for its children what any other community does—what the more privileged districts give their children. The reeducation of parents is not a difficult matter. Unemployed people who see that the old ways are outdated are not a hardsell for the new. Also, if some parents are given a tour of more progressive schools and an explanation of the methods used, they can sell the rest of the community. The African-American community has practically always supported its schools, but the reverse has not always been true.

Seventh, it is true that Pennsylvania Street Middle School is part of a bureaucratic school structure. But committed teachers, parents, and students can bring about changes. What better lessons for girls than to research issues that pertain to their educational welfare and present these to the school board, to other schools in the district, to churches and businesses, and to the media? How better

to learn how to speak up and bring group pressure to address educational omissions that pertain to them—more restrooms, smaller classes, more extracurricular activities, a course in women's studies, a mentoring program, a community service component to their studies, a settlement house concept of school that would provide after-school access and counseling to girls like Niara and others who very much want to make a success of their lives?

Finally, there are more problems in the African-American community today. No one denies the increased number of low-income homes, single-parent families, high rate of unemployment, drugs, and youth violence (these problems reflecting similar trends on the national scene). These ills are reasons for education to try harder, in newer, ingenious ways, to make the children more resilient and to give them some hope that by dint of using their intellect in a positive way, they can overcome their surroundings. Because these children are part of society and their futures will eventually diffuse through the social membrane, education cannot throw up its hands and say that if the parents don't do their job, we can't do ours. Too many parents have turned to self-destructive enterprises because of their feeling of doom. If that feeling is not overcome in the children, we can only expect more such parents to produce self-destructive, antisocial offspring. A vital part of the educational task is to have students examine the destructive forces that highly materialistic living has unleashed upon us all, placing value on the nonmaterial equal to (or beyond) material consumerism. That earth ecology means sharing and people-valuing.

In line with the nonmaterial, the next section continues the look at the way inner freedom or personal artistry is eroded in the girls at Penn Street. It focuses on the lack of tribute to the girls' mothers as another way their educational environment is depersonalized and made less meaningful and useful to them.

V. Mother Love: "You Could Go to Her for Anything"

Once she knew she was going back down South to be with Mamaw and all her cousins, she began to feel better. That, she thought, was certainly the "sign" she'd been looking for, because once she thought of returning to her grandmother, all other possibilities disappeared. Her going away was going to hurt her mother as nothing else had, she knew, but going away without saying goodbye to Mama would kill her.

So she had to find the right way to tell her. Wonderful, sweet Mama, who would wrestle a tiger for her kids--and would also wallop her own "cubs" fiercely when they got out of line. Mama, who'd listen to everything and still love you. Niara remembered Saturday morning pillow fights with everyone piled into Mama's big bed and covers flying all over the floor. Niara never won any of those fights, and Mama always stopped her older sister and brother from smothering her to death! She had a faint memory, too, of Mama rocking her in a huge, squeaky chair when she was about three. She knew people would say she only "remembered" it from family stories about the time she nearly died of pneumonia, but when she closed her eyes and thought of it, she could smell the apple-blossom cologne that Mama wore then.

All the times she had been ill. Mama bringing in hot chicken noodle soup to spoon down her sore throat. Mama holding her steady and saying soothing words to her as the doctor brought the terrible needle ever closer to her bare backside. To disappoint a mother like this--how could she even think of it? But another memory intruded. One of her birthday party when she was ten years old.

Mama had made her favorite, a huge peach cobbler made with fresh peaches, because Niara never cared for birthday cakes. Just before time for the company to arrive, Niara began to get nervous about deviating so drastically from standard birthday party fare. There was still time for Mama to make a quick run to the supermarket and get something that looked more appropriate. Would she, please? But Mama bent her tired knees and looked Niara right in the eye. "Baby, do you like cake?"

"No ma'am, Mama."

"Then, little girl, if you're not stepping on anybody's rights, always do what is right for you in this world, and you'll please two very important people -- yourself and God. Hear?

"Yes, Mama."

She would go downstairs into the laundry area where mama was busy washing clothes and talk to her while Daddy was at work. She would tell her how much she loved her, how hard the decision to leave was for her, and that she will continue her education down at Mamaw's. She would remind her that it was she who taught her about pleasing herself and God, that it was she who taught her independence and principles. This she would tell to her mother whose heart would break without showing a tear in her eye. This mother who had dreamed and sacrificed for her and who once had said, "If I ever really start crying, I don't see how in the world I'll be able to stop."

"Mama!" Niara called. "Where are you?," although she knew where she was.

"Down here, Baby," responded the woman who would be defending Niara's actions to her father before long, despite her own heavy heart.

The composite picture of Niara's mother, above, is drawn from comments and writings of the girls in the study. She is largely an unheralded heroine whose daughters love her greatly. A pivotal remark from Etta during her interview began her creation. She said, in explaining to me why she'd take almost any problem she had to her mother rather than her father (and would advise Niara to do the same), that moms understand.

Q: Who's probably the worst person she could ask for advice?

A: Her father.

Q: Her father. Why?

A: The mother, they different. You could go to her for anything, but dads, they don't give you no slack.

Although some girls said there are some problems they'd take to a male rather than a female ("Depends on the problem," said Jimmi), and Cookie said there's no problem she'd take to her mother because she doesn't get along with her, all girls in the study believed in the power of female parent-figures to be supportive in times of trouble. That is, grandmothers (especially), aunts, cousins, "play mothers" (affectionate, esteemed female authority figures who take time with the girls), and godmothers. Recall that Whitnee wished her grandmothers to live to be 300 years old, and even though Kelly gets angry at her grandmother for "instigating" (starting trouble), she wanted to be able to support her, if need be, when she is an adult herself.

Family is very important to these girls. As with Brenda, you don't have to be around them long to discern the love, affection, and pride in their relatives. Stories of cousins, uncles, brothers, fathers, mothers, and grandmothers. I was amazed when I began teaching drama at the school how open the students become once they trust you and feel safe with you. When they feel free to tell you their stories. In a paper about the girls I wrote last year, I said:

They are the majority of the [drama] girls, so pleasant, so eager to do drama . . . with me and so happy to have a willing audience for their incidents, stories and tidbits once I got them talking about what is important . . . to them. . . . Cecelia [is happy] about receiving a letter from and sending a reply to her cousin in Tennessee with whom she spends the summer; Dalya about receiving some money from a relative. Yolanda took another trip with her folks.

It was during these talks in drama circle formation that I learned that Queenie had a girl cousin in the military service, that Dalya went to visit her incarcerated brother every month at the Coldwater detention facility, and that Evonne was delighted at the prospect of another baby coming into the family.

But mother is the most important. I would say that, to some of the girls, she is sacred. Understanding all that she has gone through to get them where they are, knowing the sacrifices, witnessing the hope where there is no reason for it, and hearing the prayers, the girls identify closely with her and revere her. One of the biggest wishes in the lives of girls who are "mama's girls" is to make their mothers proud of them. Often, the wish for material goods is to provide more comfort, ease, and happiness for a lady who has worked all her life without receiving many of those rewards.

In Gwaltney's Drylongso (1980), a soul-permeating sadness is present in her words when Estelle O'Connor Kent says:

I always wanted my mother to be proud of me, but I never really turned out to be nothin, you know, nothing she could really be proud of. There are so many things I want to do. . . . But I don't have education! I don't have the job! I didn't turn out to be the kind of person I wanted to be. (p. 215)

And so it is revealed: a very important reason for remaining in school, for girls who are close to her, is to please mother. Because, in the Black community traditionally, achieving educational status was the way to achieve social and financial status, mothers want their children to complete their schooling. Staying in school and qualifying for a "sit down" job also offers safety to African-American young women. It pleases a mother to know that her daughter is beyond

unwanted sexual advances in somebody's kitchen. In these times of high unemployment, vowing to remain in school is both a way to improve chances at jobs-roulette and to maintain affective ties with mom.

For the girls who are church-attenders, religion supports and encourages their esteem for their mother. Children are taught to revere their parents and to be obedient to them. Mother's Day in African-American churches is a tremendously important one in which even passed-away mothers are remembered and honored. A mother with a large brood is made to feel proud on that day and may be rewarded with the title of Mother of the Year if she is active in church work.

It was Etta's intense pride in her mother's ability to "be there" for her that made me investigate more closely the other girls' actual and symbolic relationships with their female parent. What I found was that she is far from the only one who puts much of her faith in mother, even when relations with father are good. Mother stands for survival, unconditional love, and listening. After being in school all day in a condition of voicelessness, it is important that there is a figure who listens and returns love at home.

Although most of the eighth-grade girls felt that Niara should talk to her teacher, Mrs. Varnette (rather than parents) first, it is because she functioned as a mother-figure to them. She is someone who listens—and therefore, shows caring concern. Deirdre, in drama, hoped "the teacher can go talk to [Niara's]

mama. Teacher just might take her from her mama." Then Mrs. Varnette would act more completely in a mother's role.

Michelle and Rakeeta are two of the girls who mention their mothers often during ordinary conversation. Michelle's top-ten wish was "to always have" her mother. Rakeeta prevailed upon Cookie (who doesn't get along well with her mom, remember) to help her write a playlet in the third drama session that spotlighted Niara having a conversation with her mother.

Niara: Mommy, I want to drop out of school.

Mother: Why?

Niara: Because I don't have time to go to school, clean up the house and cook, and hang out with my friends.

Mother: Well, honey, I think that you shouldn't drop out of school.

Niara: But Mom, I just have too many things to do and I'm tired of getting up every morning and doing the same stuff every day.

Mother: Well, dear, go to school and we will talk about it [more] when you come home.

The mother does not dismiss Niara's unhappiness as unimportant. She listens, shows her affection for Niara by using endearing terms, and implies that some relief can be expected. Cookie was every bit as engaged in coming up with the playlet or mini-play as Rakeeta was. Perhaps she helped create the kind of conversation she would like to have with her own mother.

Writing the mini-plays was a partner activity, but Michelle preferred to write hers alone and was given permission to do so because it seemed important to her. Here is her Mom-Niara dialogue:

Niara: Mom, I don't like school anymore, but I don't know if I should drop out.

Mom: If you do drop out, you will have to leave my house.

Niara: But I am confused. I have a lot of responsibility on me.

Mom: I know you do, but that's no reason to quit school.

Niara: It is just a lot of hard work.

Mom: Hard work helps you to grow.

Niara: Well, can I get somebody to help me with some of the housework?

Mom: I thought you did have help.

Niara: No, I don't, or we wouldn't be having this conversation.

Mom: Well, the decision is yours, but whatever you do, do it fast.

Niara: It's not that easy. It is not that easy at all.

Mom: It is your decision to make.

Niara: But I need some help.

Mom: You have to find help yourself.

Niara: Could you give me some advice?

Mom: The only advice I can give you is to do what you want, because you are the . . . one who has to live with the results.

The mother whom Michelle crated is one who is rearing her daughter to be an independent woman. She will listen to her, but will not solve her problems for her. This mother undoubtedly works outside the home and is doing all she can to keep things together. She has her job and Niara has hers. Niara can find a way to lighten things up on herself, if she can, but the responsibility for the work

is still hers. The next day, when Michelle performed this skit with Rakeeta, she was the mother. She looked her daughter straight in the eye as she spoke, but touched her shoulder as she did it. Soft and stern at the same time.

These are other qualities for which the girls seem to love their mothers: being "upfront and not taking no mess." These are qualities she strives to impart to her daughters and the girls recognized them in Niara when they met her. They understood why a 16-year-old girl would feel that she could strike out on her own and expect to "make it." This daughter was reared for responsibility and independence. She is not a "hard" or "super-strong" young African-American female; she is simply one who has always risen to what is expected of her—by herself and her parents.

In Whitnee's and Kelly's mini-play, Niara received more help from her mother and father than she had in Michelle's, but the same themes were there: conversation, listening, caring, and responsibility. Mother knew that school was not the best place in the world, but she told Niara that it could save her from one day having to live in the streets. And, like the unspoken idea in two other playlets, the mother hoped that attending school would diminish interest in the boyfriend. Both mother and father gave her advice to not get pregnant, but mother's was spoken as a prayer and father's was a threat.

For a girl who loves her mother but hates school, there exists a serious dilemma. To satisfy her mother and family, she may be willing to try to stick out school until graduation, but may be unable to seriously commit to the work that

satisfactory completion calls for. She may do enough of the work to pass, but may find herself unable to go the extra distance that excellence requires. Such a situation represents a different kind of alienation of girl from school, one that has as its cause the disparity between the values of mother and the school. What the school teaches that is incongruous with the teaching of mother/family, the girl cannot take seriously or internalize. The values-disparity centers on the place of affect in the school's interactional climate (teacher-student and student-student), the regard for creativity and independence of style in learning, and the use of conversation or talk as a teaching strategy (to which we will return in the next section). Likewise, the disparity between home and school in hands-on approaches, concrete methods, and modeling or apprentice approaches to teaching.

The reverse of the girl who endures school for the sake of her mother or family is the girl who, knowing schooling is a maternal or familial treasure, adopts pre-drop-out behaviors before she finally does drop out—in order to hurt her parents. An example of this may be the cousin whom Cookie described earlier as remaining in school only as long as her mother was there to watch her. Education in school obviously held little importance to her, and her mother's having to bring her and stay in the classroom with her is a clear illustration of their clash in values and signifies a lack of warmth in their relationship.

The preeminent point of all the foregoing discussion of the girls in the Niara study and their mothers is that the school is failing to use adequately one of the

best resources it has available to it in educating the students at Penn Street--the students' mothers. Unless the girls in this study (who have good relationships with their mothers) can see more of their home values translated into school learning, they are unlikely to commit themselves fully to learning at school. Even the more achieving students, like Cecelia and Ivy, would do better having a sturdier "values bridge" between the home and the school. Some of the things they sorely missed at Penn Street last year are characteristics of home as well as of elementary school: endearing names, talking and listening, freedom of movement (to a reasonable extent), participatory or experiential learning, and attractive surroundings. They missed the things that are components of good mothering or good nurturing--the I-care-about-you part of school.

One program at Penn Street is doing work with an affective (I-care-about-you) element that is worthy of emulation by others. Dawn's mother is an active participant in the work because she has a son in the Chapter One program. Even without her child being in the program, she would probably be an active member of any progressive parent organization in the school because of her concern for the progress of Penn Street children. This mother, a minister's wife with a full-time night job, somehow manages to be the ubiquitous Pennsylvania Street Middle School parent. Mrs. Smith seems always to be chaperoning some class's field trip, sitting on some parent committee, and, in general, making herself useful at the school. Seeing that her children often come home without any homework, Dawn says of her mother: "My mama give us her own homework, a whole lot of

stuff in some books she bought. I'd rather do the teacher's homework than all that stuff she be givin' us." Anyway, at a recent Chapter One program in the school auditorium, Mrs. Smith's name, and Dawn's, were listed in the program leaflet as contributing members of the Chapter One Parent-Student Theatre Production Group.

Chapter One parents have a child (or children) in the school district's compensatory math and/or reading program. The philosophy of the program is that students do better when the parents are involved in their education. Acting on this idea, the program at Penn Street has the most active parents in the entire school. It has regular "gatherings" of parents and students for dinners that include singing and drama. These are enthusiastically and well-attended by a large proportion of the eligible families. The Chapter One coordinator, Mrs. Bracey, maintains regular contact with all parents and helps clear the way so that parents may attend the gatherings.

The production of the Theatre Group was called "Hold Fast to Dreams." Twenty parents (others could not attend because of work) and their children staged a "spirit of the family" entertainment for the school based on Langston Hughes's inspiring poem:

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die,
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Mothers were very prominent in the production as stage crew, members of the chorus, or arrangers of the cast dinner afterwards. Organizing scenes around the

words of the African-American poet, two fathers told stories, mothers and fathers sang movement-choreographed Negro spirituals and blues and performed a group chant to the works of other Black poets.

The production was strikingly staged, and when, from either aisle in the auditorium, an impressive stream of parents and offspring converged on the stage lustily singing a spirited song and adding synchronized gestures to it in unison, Penn Street students were impressed. Notorious for their poor behavior at assemblies, these students sat relatively quietly and listened and watched. The ratio of mothers to fathers was about four to one, and, as students in the audience saw the love-filled singing of parents and students together, many certainly would have wished to be a part of such a program with their parents. Two performances were given of the near-professional-quality show, and students who saw the first performance told others how good it was.

Mr. Penni's English-drama students were privileged to see "Hold Fast to Dreams" twice. Before the second performance began, they were trying to learn the identities of parents in the production whom they did not know: "Was that Renne's mother? Who was the one who came down the left side with the greenish-color dress on? You see Ronnie up there singing beside his Mama? Looked pretty good for him! [Laughter]." They were impressed by the capabilities of ordinary parents. They asked Dawn where her mother was, since her name was in the program but they did not see her. Dawn's mom was one of the ones

who had to work, she explained, but said their contribution had been mainly to "get things right on the stage," designing and arranging the set.

That program is representative of the example of hard work and excellence that parents of traditional homes and single-parent homes can set for students in the school. Single mothers, because of their greater numbers, can be a true force for renewed commitment to school on the part of their children if more active participation by these parents is courted. It is apparent to me that the girls in the Niara study will not reach a desirable level of personal artistry until/unless the school recognizes the level of influence of mothers on their daughters' beliefs and potential performance. When females are allowed to be called disparaging names in the school (many of them beginning with "mother-"), when single-parent homes are not valued as highly as two-parent homes (a reflection on the relative value of kids from those homes), girls are not internally motivated to commit themselves to the school's business any more than necessary. On the other hand, when all mothers, regardless of marital status, are encouraged more vigorously to become visible in the school, to participate at a meaningful level, and to tell the children their stories, their daughters will be more comfortable and encouraged in the schoolhouse.

The foregoing is not to be construed as an argument for single-parent homes. It is not. What it is, is an argument for single-parent kids who need to feel that their parentage is as important as anyone else's in the school. Without having to preach or teach student-estranging normative lessons about family life,

current-events readings and discussions of the new American family demographics will make it very clear to students (who really know already) the better financial, time, and other resource benefits of a two-adult family. If there is employment available.

Even young mothers who are school drop-outs have things to contribute to the welfare of their student in the school (tutoring and individual attention, organizational support, teacher assistance, parent outreach) and may be encouraged to continue their own schooling because of the experience of such work. Girls who see their mothers involved in the daily activity of the school will be inclined to take it more seriously than the student who observes that mother only comes in to make certain that the student is there and leaves as soon as mother believes she has discharged a reasonable custodial function.

It would also be of benefit to the girls to have the participation of "other-mothers" in the school. Since we have already discussed the benefits of recognition to the girls, the presence of women who could mentor them as second-mothers would be enormously beneficial for girls who are not receiving enough positive mothering at home. I am thinking specifically of Bette from last year, Deirdre, Jimmi, Kelly, and possibly Truette this school year. Other-mothers (as extended family) have always been present in African-American society. Children whose birth-mothers died in slavery, childbirth, or other unfortunate circumstances were taken by other women to rear. Knowing of the child's unfortunate circumstance, other women would also seek to lend mothering

assistance to that child (and to other children as well). Other-mothers then became the female relatives and other women in the community who knew the child and who were concerned about her/his welfare. In a larger sense, other-mothers are all the adult females in the "village" or neighborhood, in the African sense that "It takes a whole village to rear a child."

If a cadre of grandmother other-mothers or other mentors were available at Penn Street to students like Bette (whose mother is a drug-abuser), they could do a world of good for children who need somebody to show them more time, attention, or just converse casually with them. A quiet activity or interactional program along the line of a Pal-program ("Grandpals," perhaps) could provide students the inner support they need to grow and develop their artistry in life. In Bette's case, I cannot imagine that a concerned other-mother would not have found some kind of help for her--through a social, service, or church organization --so that her whole young life does not revolve around carrying a responsibility for younger siblings that she is too young for. Such assistance would have helped her siblings, as well, it is certain. With the family burden she is being forced to carry, there is no hope that Bette can long remain in school, doing none of the work and sleeping practically the whole day.

Deirdre demands more of a teacher's time, on a consistent basis, than any teacher could possibly give without seriously shortchanging other students. She interrupts, interjects, roams around, and plays every word, deed, or situation for as much comedy as possible. She did excellent, imaginative work as Mrs.

Varnette offering counsel to Niara in one activity in the first drama (she received an ovation from the others because she was so serious and focused) and thereafter tried to rest on her laurels. Her most irritating behavior is to always ask for repetition of what the teacher just said (and which she would have known if she'd been listening). She talks a lot to her friends when she's not supposed to, but sometimes she's just out there in space. I looked up her records to see if she has a hearing loss. She has some loss in her left ear, but not a serious one. Hearing in a small class in which she normally sits next to the teacher should be absolutely no problem for her. Her friends, Dawn, Michelle, Jimmi, and sometimes Rakeeta, treat her like a pet buffoon and enjoy her wisecracks sometimes. However, they shoo her away when she interrupts their concentration on something they find interesting or important.

It is probable that an other-mother mentor could satisfy at least some of Deirdre's excessive demands for attention and recognition. Her own mother is somewhat elderly and can in no way keep up with the antics of this physically and mentally lively girl. Just having someone else for her to talk to on a frequent basis might benefit the student, her mother, and her teachers.

Jimmi is such a complexity of problems that it is difficult to speculate what the school can offer that might be of help to her. She lives in a home with many relatives, has moved frequently in her 13-year-old life (12 past schools are listed in her cumulative record), has a boyfriend from Penn Street who is reportedly in the juvenile lock-up, and reputedly sleeps around with many other boys. Her

whole descriptive profile bespeaks a need for more individual attention. She is overly affectionate to her friends, hugging them and standing close in drama class. They peel her off, but she is back before long. This behavior is contrary to the message her "tough girl" exterior carriage transmits. Despite all her intellectual gifts, it appears that her emotional needs are causing her downfall. A mentor who can bestow some individual attention may be of therapeutic benefit to her. Anyway, it could be tried to see.

Kelly, too, just may be better off having someone at the school to speak to individually. Regularly scheduled times for meeting may coax some of the shyness and reluctance to talk from her. Such a relationship with an other-mother may be the bridge that Kelly can use to form better relationships with her peers and others in the building. Certainly, it would be helpful and healthful for her to share her dreams about becoming a singer with someone else. Other than the girls in our drama group (and now Mr. Penni, because of my collaboration with him), I am certain no one else in that school knows a side of Kelly other than the quiet, half-withdrawn one she shows to the school-world.

It may be that Truette has become too hostile for any school remedy, causal remedy, that is, to ameliorate. Particularly with her increasing dislike of authority and authority-figures. It may be, however, that the right other-mother could strike a responsive chord in her, particularly one who felt similarly about school at her age. This would be a risky thing to try with an unsuspecting person, though, and the volunteer would have to be apprised of the negative

attitude she would likely encounter. However, if she is able to convince Truette that she is not formally related to the school and has no authority over her in any way, she may be able (more than anyone at the school) to convince her of benign intentions. This other-mother mentorship is a hypothetical hope, however, because it is very unlikely that Truette's teacher (and the previous ones before she came to the AEP program) will fail to "promote" her on to high school. Very few teachers would choose to flunk Truette and therefore have to live with her "mouth" for another year, I believe. She is overage for eighth grade already.

In concluding this section on mothers and other-mothers, which could well be entitled "The Power of Participating Mothers--The Secret Weapon in Educating Girls," it is well to reiterate that the discussion falls under the umbrella of Black feminism (a philosophy that recognizes some of the basic tenets of White feminism but considers the matter of Black female liberation as different because of the history and lower caste of African-American females in the society. It centers its perspectives on the experience of Black females in this country and openly acknowledges its debt to African-American mothers). Researcher-writer June Jordan speaks poignantly of the identifying characteristic of Black feminism below:

Just yesterday I stood for a few minutes at the top of the stairs leading to a white doctor's office in a white neighborhood. I watched one Black woman after another trudge to the corner, where she then waited to catch the bus home. These were Black women still cleaning somebody else's house or Black women still caring for somebody else's sick or elderly, before they came back to the frequently thankless chores of their own loneliness, their own families. And I felt angry and I felt ashamed. And I felt, once again, the kindling heat of my hope that we, the daughters of

these Black women, will honor their sacrifice by giving them thanks. We will undertake, with pride, every transcendent dream of freedom made possible by the humility of their love. (Collins, 1990, p. 115)

A translation of the perspective that honors Black mothers and families into the education of children is found in Hopson and Hopson (1990). They emphasized that a positive education for the African-American student keeps her connected to the family.

. . . The strengths of the Black family are more than mere subjects for academic discussion. They are real, and they are responsible for the survival and growth of Black people in this country for centuries. We must tell them and make them understand that these sources of support are there for them if they are willing to remain connected to them. That means, among other things, being devoted to the family; valuing education and hard work; and remaining connected to the church, the center of the spiritual, social, and political activity in the Black community. These are the roots that define who they are and help them form positive images of themselves.

. . . [The] breakup of families is nothing new to Black people. It has been our lot through slavery and subsequent economic realities. That has been our history in this country. And we have survived it only by drawing on the strengths within our families and our culture. (p. 93)

This is the power that the girls at Penn Street draw upon when they remain close to their mother and/or other-mothers. And it is this power that the school could use to its advantage by understanding it and using it to teach African-American adolescent girls.

Niara and the girls in the Niara study have pointed to the usefulness—the importance—of conversation (dialogue) to them. The next section explores how the use of conversation may be employed to advantage in improving artistry and education.

VI. Talking-With as Teaching: "He Talks to Us and Tells Us Things"

Now that she had made up her mind to leave this school, Niara wanted Mrs. Varnette to understand. There was no danger of her being talked out of her decision now that she fully knew her own mind. After so much talking and talking to God and everyone else, she finally listened to the voice inside her saying that everyone meant well, but that she knew best.

Because Mama and Daddy had actually heard her and tried to understand, she had hopes that Mrs. V would, likewise, prove empathetic. Mrs. V might just still be her friend. Unlike Debra and Jawan. They said they supported her, but behaved artificially toward her. Debra didn't call much anymore, and Jawan not at all. He hadn't really expected her to act on her words. It's a good thing she had made her own arrangements to work and live with some extended family until she could afford to go live with her grandmother.

She and Mrs. V used to have such wonderful conversations. Mrs. V listening contentedly while Niara dreamed aloud about her future--her travels, her career, her rainbows. She wanted Mrs. V to know she hadn't wasted her time listening to her, advising her. And that she wasn't pregnant. Niara felt certain that she could still become a professional and have a hand in righting some of the many things she found wrong with the world. She wanted Mrs. V to maintain faith in her and to believe she wasn't a loser. She wanted to leave with Mrs. Varnette's blessing, if she could.

As she turned the corner to her favorite teacher's part of the building, there flashed in her mind a picture of her younger brother cooking and cleaning and trying to figure out how to use the washing machine without asking anybody. Doing "her" chores after she'd left. Her brother, the original macho-man in Mama's apron! A deep, healing smile creased her face. The first one in a long time, and it felt good.

To girls at Pennsylvania Street Middle School, talking-with in teaching is highly regarded as a hallmark of good teaching and is associated with caring-about. The evidence for this is:

1. Last year's interview with Brenda, Ninette, and Bette in which they said their elementary school teachers "took time" with them and talked with them.
2. Brenda's assertion that her favorite teacher last year "teaches us everything, not just science and health. He talks to us and tells us things, how to behave. He teaches and preaches!"
3. Tammy's plea, at the teacher-student meeting, for teachers at Penn to treat students "more like family" (as elementary school teachers did) by telling them about hobbies and interests.

In addition, Mr. Penni, the seventh-grade girls' present English teacher and the eighth-grade girls' former English teacher, is liked by all the girls in the study and is a favorite of his students. Last year's girls regarded him as their "fairest" teacher because he allows them some voice in the classroom as far as discipline is concerned and talks to them about general matters. The teacher next door to Penni, the math teacher on that seventh-grade team, said that he, a Black teacher, had never once heard the kids call the English teacher "prejudiced." "[Penni] and I've been together through a lot of transfers to schools around here, over 15 years. They [the students] come in here saying everything, but one thing I've never heard in all these years is one of them say he is [racially] prejudiced," said Mr. Roosevelt. One girl, in fact, so astounded by his continual

pleasantness and equanimity with his students, blurted out one day, "Mr. Penni, have you ever been prejudiced?"

A key to Mr. Penni's esteem by the students is his habit of taking time to talk to students individually. When one has pleased or displeased him, he takes the student outside the room and talks about it. He reassures the student of his continuing regard for the student, personally, but (in a discipline case) says the poor behavior has to go. In the case of a student who has demonstrated exceptional self-control, maturity, or progress in classwork, he tells the student that he has no wish to embarrass her or him in front of the others, but wants the student to know how he "appreciates" the fact that the student chose his class in which to demonstrate this wonderful behavior or attitude or performance. Person-to-person recognition and praise. After Mr. Penni bestowed such a compliment on a young lady recently, she exclaimed, "Thank you, Mr. Penni!" He says it never fails that students talked to in that way do better in class and support his teaching, although, sometimes, talking-with has to be coupled with more customary approaches to win the student's cooperation.

His approach seems to have developed from an understanding of what students experience as they leave elementary school for the middle school, and that their stories are important.

What mostly matters to me, I guess, the longer I've taught, is that the kids are going through so many changes coming out of elementary. Although what I teach them is important, I feel that how I present it to them, how I am as a person is equally important. I don't think I'm any less effective because I'm not Black. . . . And I think that by presenting someone in the

classroom who is . . . interested in what they say and do--I feel more success that way.

His methodology, already partially conversational, has been growing in the direction of using student-teacher talk more deliberately as a basis of pedagogy. As a result of our collaboration for three years, he now teaches improvisational drama in small groups and finds the students to be enthusiastic about that kind of learning because talk is meaningful and focused on students' ideas and experiences. When they share their "good news" in the drama circle and connect drama themes with their own lives, he is provided avenues of getting to know students better and ways of connecting his teaching with their ideas.

I have found, too, that students like working in my drama class because talking with the teacher makes them feel more valued, respected, and competent. Moreover, talking with each other and sharing or refuting ideas legitimates opportunities to converse. Imaginative, creative talk is their forte. "What if . . .," "How do you suppose . . .," "Just imagine . . .," and "Put yourself in the place of . . ." have led us to many exciting, participatory, intellectual sessions. I was surprised and gratified at that teacher-student meeting when two of my former male students (not eager converts to the dramatized way of learning at first) insisted to the attending faculty that "we need more drama."

Drama pleases students, I believe, because it has many of the components of at-home conversation to which they are accustomed. These are: a pleasant context, enjoyable learning, time taken, self-expression, and response stemming from active listening. Since I have already alluded to the

importance of certain home-styles to the school learning of the girls in this study, and home-style conversation is one of these, I shall examine each of the components of at-home talk below.

Pleasant Context

Talk at home is largely an affective event, according to information that drama girls have shared in the circle for three years. It is part of family relaxation, caring, and keeping in touch. It occurs when the self-protective mask for the outer world can be shed and the true self revealed. At home, girls are spoken to as individuals. They are called by affectionate names by their parents. Chief among these customary names are Baby, Shug (for sugar), Honey, Darling, Doll, and the affectionate term, Daughter. They are addressed individually by one of those names or their given name. The questions they are asked are nonrhetorical and are not phrased to trap.

In drama, when we have discussed ways of knowing that our families love us, the answers have been, among others, "She call me her Baby," "They smile when they say my name," and "He speak to me nice, don't yell." These are affectionate values that the students associate with conversation at home. Belonging, smiling, terms of endearment, "nice" voice tone and level. Additionally, numerous conversations occur around mealtime, a happy, looked-forward-to time of day.

In drama class, politeness and listening are the supreme rules. Drama stops absolutely when these rules are not adhered to. In this sense, drama is a

magic circle inside of which all are protected from the rudeness outside. Everyone must talk to and work with everyone else in a mannerly fashion. Similarly, everyone must listen to the words and ideas of others and allow that each has her own point of view. No one's ideas are "wrong" or unacceptable: they get tossed into the air along with everyone else's and are sorted and categorized for immediate utility along with everyone else's. And calling students "Hon" (for Honey) or by name and touching them lightly on the top of the shoulder is my customary way of teaching.

Time Taken

Conversations at home are generally relaxed between daughter and parents and do not have to be squeezed in "before the bell." Much talk occurs in old, comfortable clothes and while lolling around the house. Mothers and daughters talk while they fix each other's hair, work in the kitchen, and plan outfits for church and other places. Conversations not finished one time can readily be taken up another, with little loss in quality. Other quality-time conversations take place between the girls and their siblings and members of their extended family. Meaningful talk happens in homes, at shopping malls, on outings, family trips, and so on. The pleasure is in the lack of pressure, time limitation, and prescription.

Although drama is best taught in double periods and I have not had an abundance of those at Penn Street, it is not as subject to time pressures as ordinary teaching. Issues not explored today can be entertained in the next

session, whether it be the next day or the next week, as long as believability (imaginary memory and commitment) and interest are retrieved. Thoughts that need to be expressed before the next meeting can be written in a poem or story or drawn in a picture and shared with the group later on. Everyone has her full allotment of time to express and to share (or not, as it sometimes happens). What is talked about is meaningful because the girls are encouraged to find connections between the themes, situations, predicaments or dilemmas and their own lives and not feel that the learning is a busy-work enterprise (as Niara did much of the time).

In drama, there are no desks or rigid armchairs unsympathetic to the human body. Students ordinarily sit in cafeteria chairs in a circle at the beginning of the hour and thereafter in any formation that suits the development of the story—on the floor, in two's or larger groups, or even alone if the work calls for it (or they desire it). Talk comes easily and, as they respond to their own thoughts and those of others, the students often surprise themselves by what they know.

Pleasurable Learning

Talking is an important part of learning to the girls in the study. Being able to talk about what they're learning helps them understand it. Once last year when we were discussing the question "What makes you know that you understand something?" the answers included being able to talk about what was being learned. Queenie said that when a person asks her a question about the material, she is able to explain it to them. Yolanda said that she is able to

answer without having to "work it out." Ebony said she is sure she knows when she is able to remember something for a long time, and that talking about ("discussing") what is being learned helps her do that. She added the condition that teachers show patience with her and "don't be so harsh with their words," perhaps remembering disagreeable learning episodes.

In the community and at home, talk accompanies learning and is a feedback mechanism for the teacher--"You got that?" When a child learns to ride a two-wheeler, when a student learns to cook, and at numerous other times, the parent or other teacher is solicitous for the student's welfare and requires spoken proof of learning at regular, small intervals. For a people limited to oral learning and memorization for many years of their sojourn in this country, oral methods are prized. Many older Black people have phenomenal memories and can recite long passages of the Bible and other books learned long ago. They are surprised that children in the community do not do oral math at school or learn the speeches of heroes and recite them from memory at school programs. In Sunday School programs, traditional churches still require the learning of lengthy "pieces" of many stanzas from sacred literature and long, multi-verse passages from African-American literature. In that way, the church community learns how the children under its care are "coming along" and who is "apt" and who is not, at least in the matters of memorization and artful recitation.

At home, in a job at a local beauty shop or store, the student may help keep records, write letters, and/or make business telephone calls. She will,

subsequently, be ordinarily asked to re-explain some matter of importance as a check on personal understanding or as a refresher to the memory of the adult involved. No matter what is written on paper, the student will be expected to explain it to the adult's satisfaction and to answer relevant questions about it. Since the proof of learning is oral explainability, it is reasonable to expect that the student be able to engage in pertinent talk while learning. No matter how much written work accompanies a "lesson," the African-American girl is required to give oral proof of learning. School teachers whose students cannot do this are not considered good teachers by the community, in most cases. Oral-derived cultures prize learning that they can hear, in addition to other kinds.

Drama uses mainly oral methods during the actual lesson, although prior reading and research may be required of students, or may be necessary afterwards to the continuation of the drama or the connecting of it to prior school or life knowledge. The girls extract from previous dramas and preparatory readings ideas that they wish to keep, which they think are important. They think and problem-solve while trying to extract themselves from "situations," and express themselves during reflective times within or after the lesson or day's dilemma. The words they choose to speak at such times are often powerful and moving, as when Ivy said she thought students should be allowed to wear Malcolm X tee-shirts to school if they want to, with no hassle from any adult about not understanding his philosophy properly. She had told a teacher who argued with her that she would not "burn" her shirt as he suggested. "I told him

that everybody who tries to help Blacks gets killed. We should remember them all for that and wear their shirts to remember them by."

Listening and Responding

Having someone listen to them is a prime way of increasing self-esteem in young people because it indicates that they are important enough for someone to stop and pay attention to. Last year when I made a list of the students' affective complaints about their schooling, the largest category dealt with not being listened to. Thirty-three drama students complained in many ways that their voices were unheard inside many of their classes and in the general schoolhouse milieu.

Another thing that bothered the girls were the rules for speaking—the hand-raising for turn-taking, the being finished when the teacher says so, and the lack of opportunity to respond to someone's words, except by permission of the teacher. Classroom speaking situations are so unnatural to some of the students that they just keep quiet. Rakeeta is a case in point. She was slow to believe that the participatory speaking arrangements in drama were not a hoax and had to be urged by her friends to express herself more. She appears to be naturally quiet in school, but away from it is completely different. In the classroom, she is not assertive. When a teacher-led conversation or discussion is taking place, she says that by the time she raises her hand and is recognized, the group has gone on to something else. So she doesn't often bother trying to participate.

She is a year older than her classmates in the seventh grade and thinks that all "that hand-raising" is "babyish."

What she and others miss is the call-and-response speech style of the typical African-American community. This style is an energetic, synergistic one in which speaker and listener(s) both participate in a speech, talk, or conversation by mutually supporting the other. The speaker invokes oral support by asking variously, "Am I right?," "Can I get a witness?," "Yes?," or the like, and the listeners, prompted or unprompted, respond with such replies as "Tell it!," "Sho' 'nough," "Speak!," and "Tell it like it is! It is a natural way of speaking that bicultural Blacks learn not to use around Whites. Whereas the White form of speech usage (nonsimultaneous verbal response) serves to silence some girls, it is simply a matter to be ignored by others. Jimmi, Cookie, and other seventh graders just say what they want to say when they want to say it until a teacher gets tired of their "interruptions" and puts them out of class. The eighth-grade girls appear to use the school-approved speaking procedure more readily and seem, in any case, less spontaneous and excited about their contributions to a general class discussion.

Although the African-American call-and-response style is disruptive to those teachers unused to it, some teachers at Penn Street and some in other places have learned to become familiar with cultural speech patterns of their students and to use them to the students' advantage. African-American call-and-response is reminiscent of Hawaiian "talk story," an ethnic use of speech in

which members of Hawaiian families all appear to talk at the same time. In the K.E.E.P. project (Kamehameha Early Education Project), teachers allowed the children to use their at-home speaking style at school, and the children made better progress. In another case (Heath, 1983), Appalachian students improved in school learning when teachers learned to phrase questions to them as their parents did at home. Both of these studies are cited widely in the educational literature reporting on the teaching of ethnic school populations, and seem applicable to speech situations at Penn Street.

Other than in drama class, extracurricular activities (which are predominantly sports) seem to be the main programs in the school that allow the students to use their natural conversational form without penalty (on a regular basis). About the importance of the call-and-response speech form of Black English or African-American expression to the learning of African-American (unicultural) students, Smitherman (1977) wrote:

. . . The real concern and question should be: How can I use what the kids already know to move them to what they need to know? This question presumes that you genuinely accept as viable the language and culture the child has acquired by the time he or she comes to school. This being the case, it follows that you allow the child to use that language to express . . . herself, not only to interact with . . . peers in the classroom, but with you, the teachers, as well.

For example, the call-and-response dynamic is integral to the communication system of Black English. . . . Since Black communication works in this interactive way, then it means that Black students who are passively listening aren't really learning. Teachers can capitalize on this dynamic by recognizing that they should expect—indeed, be desirous of—some "noisy" behavior from Black kids. (pp. 219-220)

That message to teachers underscores the importance of verbal interactions between teachers and students. For the girls at Penn Street, it means an encouragement of their voices around subject matter that they may connect to their lives, their experiences. In this way, teaching can support the development of the girls' artistry, their inclinations toward creativity and independence, more than it has in the present. Although there are many teachers at the school who would not dream of presenting to students the collection of dittoes to which Niara objected in the "Identity and Alienation" section, too few are encouraging the girls' voices through more conversational or dialogic teaching.

The "conversation" that ordinarily occurs consists of teacher-centered direction-giving followed by quiet seatwork by students followed by further teacher-centered activity (questions and answers, discussion of topic, recap, quiz, and so on). Even though cooperative learning is becoming more widely used in the building, there is no question but that the knowledge belongs to the teacher. Students are merely allowed to approach it in a different way. The function of a teacher-given role to a student involved in cooperative learning is to position the student in a teacher-approved way in relation to the knowledge. While there are parameters and limits to conversational teaching, it does alter the traditional relationships of students and teacher in relation to the knowledge being examined in a way that spreads ownership more evenhandedly among teacher and students. This being the case, students should be encouraged to

speak in their authentic voices from their experiences and personal knowledge, and from their cultural styles.

As an example of conversational teaching/learning with call-and-response interaction in drama class, the following dialogue immediately followed the final Niara improvisation in which the mothers of the neighborhood finally decided to throw their "trust" ethic to the wind and stormed the suspicious party that Deshonna, the drop-out, was giving for their "babies." I wanted them to examine Niara's likely decision following the opulence of Deshonna's home and circumstances.

Me: OK, we're out-of-role now. I think the things you said in-role are pretty much the sorts of things parents would worry about. What do you all think, though, about Deshonna's advice to Niara (to stay in school)? In the presence of all her money, do you think Niara will want to follow Deshonna's advice? What will she do?

Dawn: Stay in school!

Whitnee and Cookie: Both.

Cookie: She [Deshonna] said she wasn't doing no good at first, but then.
...

Michelle: That'd make her want to stay [in school].

Cookie: But seeing her house and all, that's make her want to do the same. . . . That might make her want to stay out, but--

Dawn: She say Deshonna doing something, so she want to do it, too. But Deshonna kinda encouraged her to drop out because she said, "All my friends selling drugs" and all that.

Me: But Deshonna did say she is sorry to her heart that she didn't stay in school, herself. She kept saying that. But what's going to be more powerful, what Niara sees or what Deshonna says?

Dawn: The house and everything what she see . . . but a lot of what she hear probably not true.

Almost everyone: Tell the truth! She sho' did lie. Bet half of that stuff is still . . . with drug money . . . or hot . . . true, girlfriend [Whitnee and Rakeeta give each other "five" here].

Jimmi: They talkin' about me!! They talkin' about me like I ain't even here!!! [Laughs with amusement.]

Someone: You ain't, you over! [Jimmi improvised the role of Deshonna.]

Everyone laughs.

Michelle: It's hard! She could go either way. I don't know. . . .

Cookie, Rakeeta, and others nod their heads in agreement.

Whitnee: I know! Ask me!

Unintelligible, small comments here from the others; Dawn is loudest.

Me: Well, we'll have to get to it another way. I want you to write a poem, please, about Niara's feelings after the party—

Cookie: She tired!

Me: You're right, she's probably too tired immediately after the party to decide, but that's not what I meant Miss Cookie.

[She rolls her eyes comically in an I'm-a-bad-girl attitude. Others giggle a little.]

Me: Let's make the poem be one year later. That OK with everyone? It doesn't have to rhyme. What Niara is thinking and feeling one year later [said deliberately].

Dawn: Do we have to write Niara name in the poem?

Me: At this point, you can extend Niara's feelings to yourself, if you want to, what you feel.

Whitnee: Will we get a copy back, like the Malcolm X poem? [She means laminated on colored paper.]

Me: No prob.

Cookie: I didn't get mine back!

Two people: You stay absent.

Cookie: So?

Me: Cookie, I have yours. Ladies [who are having various mini-conversations], back to this poem.

Jimmi: I can type 'em. I got a new typewriter and don't never use it. I want to give my typewriter work.

Me: Yes, thanks, that'd be a big help, Jimmi. Who understands the assignment and can tell it to me?

[All hands go up immediately.]

Me: [Laughing] Good. Now, you don't have to. Please come for paper if you need some. Find yourself a spot with lots of space round it. Cemetery time [meaning, get very quiet].

[Kelly is also present during this conversation but doesn't choose to speak. Her attitude is one of involvement, however. Deirdre was sent to the office the first hour of drama. She asked to go to the restroom, but went through the halls disturbing various classes until the hall patrol stopped her.]

Immediately after obtaining paper and pen, the class became more serious. They found places on stage and among the audience seats and wrote quietly for about 30 minutes. Kelly and Jimmi asked for more time and wrote for five more minutes. After that, each girl shared her poem orally with the group. That was not a conversational time, so each girl listened to the others quietly and with interest. In a sense, though, the girls' writing was the continuation of our dialogue--her further contribution to it and own point of view that, perhaps, had

been sharpened or deepened by the oral conversation that preceded it. For that reason, the interactive dialogue or conversation will be examined now.

The tone of the conversation was casual and playful, occurring, as it did, immediately after a full 50 minutes of concentration and improvisation. It served as the conclusion to that and the four previous dramas that had probed Niara's dilemma about staying in school or dropping out and her complex identity as an introspective, socially mature African-American adolescent female. In the conversation, Deshonna's advice versus the influence of her life-style are "on the table" for us to consider; in other words, will Niara or won't she, and why? The casualness of tone and their familiarity with the question increased their "ownership" of the proceedings and the likelihood of their investment and participation. Previously, many connections between their lives and Niara's had been established (gender, race, approximate age or adolescence, attitudes, relationship to family, God), the similarities and differences. They invested in Niara because they made her real, one of themselves. They constructed her as a sister.

The essential element in a conversational lesson is that it be open-ended: where the students can sense there to be an unspoken "right" answer, the talk will be reduced to students trying to pry the answer from the teacher, rather than searching intellectually. Simplistic answers do not make good conversational material, anyway. The girls knew that I did not expect them to "solve" Niara's dilemma (that is why Whitnee decided to interject her humorous "I know! I

know!). In fact, it grew more complicated with each session, thereby mirroring life, for the most part. What is interesting here is that all the girls were able to make the transition from in-role to out-of-role smoothly except, perhaps, Jimmi. Sometimes, where there has been deep emotional involvement or attachment to role, the girls require a more pronounced transition (transition aid) such as changed location in the auditorium, or a restroom break. When Jimmi said, "They talkin' about me like I ain't even here!," she was talking about her role as Deshonna, one that she portrayed masterfully for two full class periods. Someone reminded her gently that Deshonna was over ("You ain't! You over!"). If Deshonna still existed, they could not discuss her objectively, and it was time for detachment and perspective.

The ambience surrounding the conversation was purposeful, thoughtful, and cooperative. Responsive assertions did not take us away from the subject under discussion, although they have the power to do so if the teacher or a student does not then ask a question or make a comment to reestablish the central focus. The call-and-response dynamic creates pockets of off-center focus that emanate from the main focus or object. This de-centers the teacher's position even further and must be allowed briefly, ordinarily with the insertion of humor or a clever remark. In the first instance of a cultural-type response ("Tell the truth!" "She sho' did lie!," and so on), it would have been possible for me simply to agree with the responders or acknowledge their point of view briefly (by saying something like "True" or "Yes, children") and bring them back to evidence

for staying school or dropping out contained in the just-completed drama. However, because Jimmi had not yet disconnected from her role, and I did not realize it, her interjection took us further away from the focus. When that was followed by still another student interjection ("You ain't . . ."), it might have been difficult to stop the drift except that one of them, Michelle, was committed to the subject and brought us back. It always works best when a popular student acts as the teacher's formal or informal ally during these critical conversational times and refocuses the group.

One comment here about the use of humor in containing call-and-response to a reasonable level: it must be used carefully. A light touch may save a situation or help the group to refocus, and provide some enjoyment for all to underscore the "humanness" of the situation. Too much humor (the teacher's or the students') will lose the point entirely unless the teacher has established refocus mechanisms that work with the group. These may be teacher hand-raising, a hand-signal, or other gesture. My favorite ones (with this group) are a "T"-for-"time" signal (meaning, time to refocus) and absolute silence on my part. When these signals begin not to work, the girls know that I will change the activity.

Back to the post-improvisation dialogue: even though Michelle got us back on track and it seemed as if the other girls would follow along, Whitnee's "I know! I know!" inserted humor into a fragile situation, and I then realized we'd "have to get to it another way." Cookie's comment that Niara was too "tired" to

make a decision right after the party clued me in to the fact that that was the way she and the other girls were feeling. After almost an hour of activity in the drama, they needed a rest or a less group-participatory change of pace. The oral after-drama reflective conversation, for what it was worth, was completed in that form. These girls ordinarily engage in their call-and-response asides and still remain on task--when it is not the last period of the day.

Therefore, I decided that we would "take the drama to paper." The poem was a somewhat negotiated, or at least agreed-upon, venture as to time-frame and subject (Niara's feelings attributed to self or vice-versa). Also, as to the publication of the final product, with Jimmi volunteering to do the typing and my agreeing to have the poems laminated on colored paper for them. Although these "negotiations," continued in a democratic conversational mode, took a few minutes, they served to promise a high degree of interest and effort on the part of the students. Knowing the "lay of the land" before beginning the second part of our conversation (the poem) helped them to position themselves within it. In other words, by allowing their participation (including call-and-response) in this part of the "talk" as I had the former, the girls were able to assist me in providing a framework for a lesson that we both thought desirable for them to do. In this way, they would not be doing "the teacher's work" (as Yolanda had said of her social studies assignments last year), but their own. This is a central necessity for the healthy development of personal artistry in these girls (and for their sense of inner freedom to be bolstered): that they have some creative control of (or

input into) their work and some independence in its execution. When I asked, "Who understands the assignment and can tell it to me?," their show of hands signaled their comprehension of it and told me that I had lapsed or turned back to a teacher-directed, typical-classroom-conducting mode by asking them to "recite" the assignment back to me (because we do not raise our hands to speak in drama). I responded to their reminder by having them not do the typical classroom thing because it showed me they were alert to what we were doing and fully participating, including the calls-and-responses, and because I believed that they did know what the assignment was.

Looking at the girls' participation in the oral phase of the conversation, it appears that Dawn, as usual, was one of the most vocally participative ones. I believe this is so because she learns best that way. She seems to have to try out ideas and perceptions aloud before she commits them to paper. Even then, she may change her mind if she thinks of new evidence, supports or contradictions for her original point of view. Her first thought in this conversation was that Niara would "stay in school!," but she changed her mind in her poem. Her predilection toward talking is probably a combination of her early-adolescent personality (she is 12 years old) and her church training and service. As a pastor's daughter, she is expected to serve in visible and audible ways: teaching younger children, announcing programs, speaking for young people on certain issues. She always looks for various sides of an issue and often reserves judgment until she is fairly certain of something, until it "feel right" to her, she

says. She is a sensitive young lady, and I understood when she asked, "Do we have to write Niara name in the poem?" that her poem might be more about Dawn than about Niara, and she was allowing herself space in case it turned out that way. I find her to be very much like Ivy was this time last year: an intelligent, vocal child who exhibits leadership and a great deal of sensitivity toward others.

Cookie is a thinking young lady who has many leadership qualities. She looks at both sides of a problem (she realized that Deshonna's possessions might be a more powerful lure than her words for Niara and supplied evidence for her thinking in the early part of the conversation). Probably because of her frequent absences from school, her speaking and articulation skills are very much in advance of her writing abilities. It is heartbreaking to see how eager she is to represent herself on paper and how unsuccessful she is at it. There often is a cynical edge to this girl's comments, which her teachers have noticed. Because of her comments about her poor relationship with her mother, I feel that relationship may be a part of the source. She is a student eager to be liked by teachers and tries her best when she feels their respect and fondness. She always speaks up for herself ("So?") and sometimes has a knack for saying just the right thing at the right time ("She tired!"). With enough assistance toward the growth of her education and personal artistry, this young lady could develop into a powerful leader in her community one day.

Whitnee, like Dawn, seems accustomed to being the center of attention (at church) and, like Cookie, sees complexity where others see simplicity. Unlike either of them, however, she will sometimes say things simply to have the spotlight turned on herself ("I know! Ask me!"—to the accompaniment of hand-waving). She is an asset in class whenever she takes matters seriously—which is most of the time—and (as I have mentioned before), because of her religion, exudes self-confidence and capability. She loves to write poetry and likes to take her copies home to display on the wall ("Will we get a copy back, like the Malcolm X poem?").

Michelle is typically an agreeable follower in drama class, but always gets her opinion in ("That'd make her want to stay. . . ."), a peer-group follower with definite limits. Once a student of teacher-pleaser answers and quick (cutesy) comments, she has learned to look for the other side, the hidden side in situations ("It's hard! She could go either way"). However, because of her age and personality, she still would like dramas to have more happy endings by the end of the period. And since we all do, to some extent, we sometimes do one for her and she becomes as happy as can be. She is more content doing drama games than theme or situational dramas. This attitude is reflected in her reading for other classes also, I believe. She doesn't care for sadness or long, drawn-out tales. Drama can be a big learning aid for her in English or social studies by making themes and philosophies more accessible to her (and to students who learn like her). She didn't care for the short-story, "Show-Down on the Tundra,"

when she read it in her English book, but seemed to like it in drama as we extracted the bravery theme and looked at it in various ways. I believe drama helps her visualize in the way that being able to speak relatively freely in class helps her understand what she thinks. This condition of more freedom for ideas-expression and conversation seems to be a necessity for a student who is predominantly an auditory learner—which she (more than some of the others) definitely appears to be.

Jimmi's work created a major part of the framework for this discussion of Niara's dilemma. I believe she was truly amazed that we took her characterization so seriously ("They talking about me! They talking about me like I ain't even here!"). The girls were not talking about her; they were talking about a three-dimensional character whom she created by pouring her heart and soul into her. Jimmi was that good, so good that the troupe thought of her and Deshonna as really -separate- characters, a difficult feat to accomplish among peers who are your in-school and out-of-school friends. It was clear in her work as Deshonna in the two dramas that the role was therapeutic for her.

She came in both times and called the class together herself, the role was so motivating for her. She would announce after the circle, "I'm ready," and the other girls would be compelled to get serious quickly whether they were also "ready" or not. What was particularly creative and intelligent about her portrayal is that it was a true improvisation: she created Deshonna as she went along, based partially on any initial conception of her she might have had and

developed her against (and in coordination with) the characters of the other girls as they developed simultaneously. However, her Deshonna was still a distinctive, commanding, sympathetic character. A little girl gone wrong with a will of steel to survive--and other mysterious character traits that we were just beginning to fathom. Certainly the words Jimmi chose for the character to speak were a joint possession of the drop-out and herself, verbal wish-fulfillment and perhaps a prayer for the future. Her actualization of the character, Deshonna, provided a real foil for the different girls who portrayed Niara, and our understanding of Niara. Within the space created by Deshonna, Niara became a more vulnerable sister, less sure of herself, and realized a psychological need for a family she had thought she could pretty well leave, if need be, without too many backward glances (except for her mother, of course). When she saw how Deshonna's boyfriend and girlfriends had betrayed her, she began to consider Jawan and Debra with fresh insights. In short, Jimmi made Niara truly live for all of us.

Jimmi is, despite her personal adjustment problems outside drama class, undoubtedly one of the most intelligent and gifted students I have been privileged to know. She is so eminently worthy of being healed and saved because she is such a teacher and embodiment of the spirit of youth. Neither the school nor the community can afford to lose another unique, inquiring gift like this young lady. In my opinion, if school reform and neighborhood renovation, plus all the social services available to both, do not collaborate to help her family help her, there is

no reason to have any remaining faith that society can help girls like the ones at Pennsylvania Street Middle School do anything other than score low on standardized tests.

Rakeeta and Kelly lent their moral support to the conversation, but not their voices. They both were attentive and participated on that level. Also, Rakeeta did give Whitnee "five" (according to my notes) when Dawn said that Deshonna had probably told Niara a lot of untruths about the source of her wealth. Kelly may have supported the hand-touching gesture of her two peers with a nod of her head (as she often does in similar circumstances), but I did not notice it at the time. But that is the thing about using talk as a teaching method. Students do not have to talk if they have nothing to say at that moment or in that medium, just as the teacher does not do all or most of the talking because she or he has more mainstream or professional knowledge of the subject. (The teacher, it is understood, does not have the students' cultural knowledge or "connective tissue" in regard to the subject). On the other hand, if a student never has anything to say, in large group or in small, and is inattentive or disruptive, that is a problem—no matter what the teaching methodology.

I believe that (as mentioned before in comments on Rakeeta) a conversational teaching approach that allows for the call-and-response relationship of speaker and listeners to object can be, if not motivating, less problematic for students who find it difficult or frightening to speak in a group

situation. When Kelly and Rakeeta are moved to speak, they do so as naturally as the others, without special invitation or receiving permission.

In their conceptualization of the use of dialogue in teaching, Shor and Freire (1987) agreed that one who wishes to communicate nothing in the conversation has no reason to speak and should not be encouraged to. According to their idea of it, the purpose of conversational teaching is to create a "liberatory dialogue." A liberatory dialogue is one that disconfirms knowledge domination and emphasizes the freedom of the participants to structure knowledge as they live and experience it. They said further:

Dialogue implies responsibility, directiveness, determination, discipline, objectives. . . . Nevertheless, dialogue means a permanent tension in the relation between authority and liberty. But, in this tension, authority continues to be because it has authority vis-a-vis permitting student freedoms which emerge, which grow and mature precisely because authority and freedom learn self-discipline. (p. 102)

The second half of the girls' conversation around the object, Niara, shows that the girls did, indeed, structure Niara's future in a mature, individual way, exercising freedom under authority. Within the drama, there were negotiated commonalities, but phenomenologically, each party to the oral conversation interpreted the key points in her own way, subsuming them to existing knowledge and arranging them in the intellect for retrieval in the written "conversation" later on. The first poem is Dawn's. It is followed by Jimmi's and Kelly's.

I'm Not So Happy Now

I'm not so happy now that I've become someone I said I wouldn't become.
 If I could only start over, my life would probably be different.
 Now that I don't know who to turn to, what I should do.
 I'm not so happy now that I don't know no one except the crack-heads I
 buy my drugs from.
 I see happy, rich people walking up and down the streets,
 Only if, only if—I could be like them.
 But now, I'm not so happy about what I have made of myself,
 Now I believe, yup, now I believe
 I probably could have been somebody
 In someone's eyes
 Besides these fools that see me.
 I believe in you, Lord, because I'm not so happy now.

--Dawn

Niara's Feelings

I'm sorry I made this big mistake
 Now I don't know if I should give or take
 My mind's on my babies I gave birth to
 I wish I would have stayed in school, like you
 I got and had all the fine things
 My fingers filled up with fine gold rings
 But now I have nothing but me and my babies
 I thought I was going to be like Deshonna, well, maybe

 Now I wish I could go back to school
Three years ago, I dropped out like a fool
 Time went by and so did my life
 Now I wish somebody would stab me with my own knife
 My parents told me not to
 Not to listen to my friends, but I didn't have a clue
 Of what could happen to me
 I need to pick up my life; that's the key
 Don't be like me
 Stay in school
 Learn from my mistakes, don't be no fool.

--Jimmi

Niara's Feelings

What will she do?
What will she decide?
She talked her problems out
Instead of trying to hide
She's smart
Will she figure it out?
Or will she mess up,
I have my doubts

She thought she could drop out
And sell drugs
But then she thought of how
She might mess up
She thought of staying
And getting an education
Her parents were putting on pressure
Maybe she needed a vacation
She talked to her boyfriend
But nothing seemed to work
She talked to her parents
Still a little confused

She ain't using drugs
She doesn't seem abused
If she ends out in the street
Nobody knows what she will do
Or where she will go

But the advice I would give
Would mean lots of sense
I would tell her to stay in
And you'll see you won't regret it
You stay in school and don't get pregnant
And I'll bet
You'll have a successful life
And a wonderful husband

I know she is confused
And after seeing Deshonna
She wanted to drop out
Because it was her decision
BUT SHE'S STAYING IN

Now a wonderful life she can begin
 She showed her feelings
 And it worked out
 I knew she would make the right decision
 I had no doubt.

--Kelly

I think that after looking at the girls' poems, it is necessary to add a qualifier to the Shor-Freire definition of dialogue. The qualifier is that the dialogue must be conducted in the subjects' own language or way of speaking, as the peasants did who worked with Freire in his conscientizing educational efforts. The words of the girls (especially Dawn's and Jimmi's) may not be pretty or of conventional schoolhouse issue, but they are their own, true verbal paintbrushes emanating from their lives, their culture, and their experiences. These are the things of which authentic conversations are comprised, at home and at school if we want to "free" students up to begin their learning journeys on a road that passes by their figurative houses rather than one skirting more expensive homes somewhere else. And the informed silences are important, too: look at what Kelly had to say after she reflected and organized her thoughts. Writing gave her the time and mode she needed.

Self-Expression From Experience

Drama at school uses the girls' personalities and experiences as assets on which to build education in the same way that a person's personality and experiences enrich the conversation of that person in the home. In conversations there, you relate your experiences in terms of your personality and

various dispositions. In drama, also, students make sense of the things studied by filtering them through their experiential background. In the previous discussion of "Listening and Responding," no matter how "raw" Jimmi's line, "Now I wish somebody would stab me with my own knife," it is her knowledge of this kind of person (or experience giving impetus to a vivid imagination) that helps create her poetry. Unpolished or not, it is her and therefore acceptable if she is to learn in her own way and not someone else's. I have already spoken of the power of her portrayal of Deshonna. Somewhere in her experiential background of learning, of hearing, of listening, of creating, and of simply being, all the other experiences (or the relevant ones) converged to create a new one, the experience of giving life to a mere name on a page. Deshonna could not have come from a girl who did not take herself seriously, nor from one in whom all intellectual divergence has been stamped out in the name of "education" and/or increased test scores. She could not have been given life by a girl who did not take her right to artistry seriously.

Experience begets experience in drama. When students discuss a scene, organize it and play it, glimmers of past experiences are there, whether recognized or not--lived and imagined experiences. In the group, those experiences are changed, rearranged, combined, synthesized to create new ones. The talk (language) that emerges from the new experience is appropriate to the new experience. When the girls are M.D.'s in a laboratory, the vocabulary speaks of the scientific universe and of sickle cell anemia. When they are

marooned travelers trying to get home, the language is geographical and nautical. One way that the dramas are made authentic is through the words used to express the experience. Usually, most of these words, phrases, expressions, and ways of being emerge naturally. When they do not, we search for specific vocabularies in which to clothe our actions. (We also save these words for use in our writing about the experience, just as drop-out, stay in, failure, success, career, future, family, GED, pregnancy, boyfriend, counseling, and so on, were used deliberately in creating Niara's world). They must express the actor and the situation.

Years ago when I began doing drama, it was with remedial reading and emotionally disturbed students. I would marvel that they seemed to enjoy saying line after line in a commercially published play that bore no relationship to their experiences at all. Aside from the fun of becoming a different and exciting person for a few minutes, they seemed to delight in being away from the loneliness of reading in their basal text. They liked the conversations in the plays; it was fun talking to somebody and being answered. Even though the content of the play might not relate to a lived or desired experience, they could tolerate that better than long readings from the basal reader because conversation was a more natural phenomenon to them. And during the oral reading of various plays, I saw that they would subconsciously change some of the words in the dialogue and make them more compatible with their own experiences. I began to see that the students made more progress in reading

and self-confidence when the words they stood up and spoke before the group related more to themselves. In the Chapter One reading classes at Penn Street, I have seen that this is true also. The students like to read plays any time they can and take pride when the words are ones they can personally identify with to some extent. This I consider more than simply reading. In essence, it is engaging in play, "playing around" with words and identities that contain some degree of personal "truth" for the students.

According to experts on play, playing and playing-around are preparation for adult life. They students get to "try on" other identities and experiences without actually living through them. They get the opportunity to think in those registers and confront some of the problems while remaining safely in their own world. Essential to this play-and-growth process are conversations and interpretations in the students' own words and ways of thinking. Improvisational (and other forms of) drama afford students this playing-around opportunity. It gives them the chance to combine imagination and intellect in a meaningful quest to understand the world.

This striving to understand the world is what much of children's at-home conversations with parents center upon. The desire to know. In drama circle, they ask me questions that they have asked other adults and compare the answers they receive. They converse among themselves. Deirdre talks a mile a minute. Cookie asks questions but is prepared to spar verbally if she can't accept the answer. Kelly may venture a quiet question or answer if she can

remain relatively anonymous and say her bit and "run." Jimmi has to stand up partially or completely because she talks with her body as well as her mouth. Whitnee will find a humorous punch-line in anything being discussed. Rakeeta will talk with several persons at once, as long as one of them is not the teacher, and Dawn never tires of asking questions. By their words, phrasing, sentence structure, sense of humor, and choice of questions, they express themselves. This self-expression is critical to their ability to think independently and to develop themselves along the lines they desire (creative re-creation).

They ask:

Whitnee: How come people so prejudice? If you not going to be here next year, who going to teach us drama?

Michelle: It don't matter what school you go to, does it, if you do your best? Can we keep on coming like this, in a group just by ourselves?

Rakeeta: Aren't answers more important than questions?

Kelly: Why would anybody think they could do anything without going to school?

Deirdre: How come so many people livin' on the streets? Don't they got no relatives to help them out?

Dawn: Do you get a better education at a Black or a White college? Would you let your kids call you by your first name?

Cookie: What if you don't have enough money for college, you have bad credit or something? Ain't parents suppose to go to jail for not doing right by their children?

Jimmi: Am I going to be in your book? Can you get me a scholarship to Morehouse?

Their experiences: past, present, future, desired, imagined. There must be a place in school for these and the conversations that go with them. They can provide that place to "begin" (as Maxine Greene says) the girls' educations if they are respected and used—in the girls' own authentic voices—without first being filtered (or "corrected") through someone else's language-value system. There is a place in their education, a proper place, for standard English usage, and it will be discussed in the next section. For now, however, it is important to emphasize that experience carries with it its own vocabulary and world of language, and these are irrevocable ingredients in talking-with-as-teaching and learning conversations.

In writing on experience and education, the philosopher John Dewey (1983) asked a question that has relevance for this discussion on the importance of using students' experiences prominently in their education:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur? (p. 49)

The other main conversational teaching method used in this study, story-response, also makes a contribution to artistry in the eighth-grade girls and works, therefore, counter to the erosion of inner freedom or competence or confidence that is the product of a depersonalized education. Meeting around the story of Niara's dilemma, individual girls and I "shaped" Niara and her future in a way consonant with the girl's perception of Niara's realities and her own. I

encouraged each girl, by probing responses as necessary, to understand that Niara was initially only a half-finished creation that awaited her own distinctive hand.

The use of story in that way provides the same hallmarks of conversation that speaking in the home and drama in school do: pleasant context, enjoyable learning situation, relatively leisure pace (time taken), listening and responding, and self-expression based on experience. In addition to these, however, the use of story or story-response provides the students the advantage of immediacy joined with individuality in the matter of (a) shaping, (b) power or influence, and (c) feminine perspective. Imagination and intelligence are important "actors" in story-response as well as drama, of course, and blend with the three factors of immediacy and individuality in ways beneficial to learning. Here are the ways they worked in the story-response interviews:

Shaping

In order for them to answer the majority of the story-response questions (there were ten formal ones), it was necessary for each girl to verbalize an impression of Niara by the second question. The girls had no particular difficulty with this, although the search for the appropriate describing words was quicker for some than for others. It was apparent that each had formed some kind of picture of Niara by the end of the scaffolding story. The pictures they formed of her were largely sympathetic, with Ebony, Queenie, Ivy, and LaDonna depicting her (interestingly enough) in words I would have used to portray them. Ebony

thought of Niara as a "nice girl." Queenie found her to be older and "responsible," and LaDonna said she was "nice," didn't want to hurt her parents, and "has her own mind." Ivy believed Niara to be "nice," also, but that she just had "too many responsibility," the way she herself has. (Last year in drama circle, Ivy's news one day was that her sister was going to have another baby. The sad look on her face cautioned me not to probe that any further in the presence of the group, but Dalya piped in, "And she don't like it." Ivy's misery was so apparent that I looked toward Dalya with a questioning look on my face, and several other girls sang a chorus of "'cause she'll have to take care of it!").

Etta saw Niara as being "fed up" with everything, Dalya believed Niara to be "smart, but confused, with a lot of problems," and Cecelia thought, similar to LaDonna, that "she like to make up her own mind."

Only Truette and Yolanda perceived her unsympathetically. Yolanda's perception was that "she seem like a person who could be persuaded into something very easily," and Truette snorted condemningly that Niara was a "confused" person, not an admirable quality to her.

These eighth-grade girls had the power to immediately shape Niara to their will or according to their comprehension of the story (an act of unconscious will, probably). Not being involved in a drawn-out, democratic, sometimes meandering process such as drama, they were able to assert their will then and there and characterize and further create the "person" whom they'd develop through eight or more formal and informal questions. They could shape and

control Niara's identity. They could make her as close to themselves or as different as acumen and fancy dictated.

Power

The immediate power to shape Niara gave the girls control over a learning situation that they would seldom have elsewhere in school. Being able to stamp an almost immediate imprint onto the character served to motivate them to take the teen-ager and the activity seriously. Although the format of the lesson/ interview was reminiscent of a basal reading lesson, the one-on-one structure and the open-endedness of the questions empowered them to think of factors that made a difference in Niara's life and made each of their versions of Niara different from the others'.

What was particularly intriguing to me and interesting for them, I believe, was their treatment of Niara's boyfriend, Jawan, in their shaping of Niara and her story. As the only explicit male presence in the tale, how they used their power to characterize Jawan is revealing. This is what they said of him:

Ebony: Her boyfriend, she might love him and all, but she know that he don't really care what she do. . . . He the worst person to give her advice. . . . In the story, he already said he didn't care what she did: his name was Wes and he don't want to be in the mess. He don't care what she do. He don't care enough.

Etta: Jawan can't do much, she should talk to her family.

Ivy: Whatever job her boyfriend got for her, she might not like. . . . I was thinking back to where her teacher told her that her boyfriend wasn't no good, and she think too much of him. I think she just left him alone for a while so she can get prepared to go on.

Cecelia: He could sit down and talk to her like her parents did. . . .

Yolanda: Noooooooo. He can't give her advice because he think she can do anything she want to.

Truette: He could tell her the same thing her friend did (implying that he probably won't).

Evonne: Her boyfriend wouldn't be able to give her no advice because he already said that it was OK to drop out and find a job or something.,

Dalya: Her boyfriend would be the one to give her the worst advice. Because he was telling her to leave, really. That he behind her, anyway.

LaDonna: Her boyfriend? Uh, UH! [Laughing] No WAY can he give her advice!. . . I think she dropped out of school and then went back, like all the people tried to convince her to do, and I think she dumped JAWAN 'cause he wasn't no good!

This last statement by LaDonna reminded me of Deirdre's in-role advice to Niara in the counselor/teacher (Mrs. Varnette)-to-Niara scene: "Your boyfriend don't love you. All he want is one thing. Once your boyfriend do what he want, you'll see that he don't love you. He just want you to drop out and have a affair with him, that's all." When the subject of Jawan came up in our interview conversation, Queenie just threw up her hand in a gesture of disgust rather than even being bothered to talk about him. The gesture said she didn't think he was worth talking about.

Cecelia, Ivy, and Yolanda had uncomplimentary words to say about the lazy brother just lying around the house, just as the girls in drama class did. And Etta (as mentioned previously) didn't think the father would be of much use in solving this kind of problem for a girl whom she and others thought he helped create the difficulty.

In all, the girls used their individual power to collectively disempower the males in the story, to make them less attractive creatures. What stands out is that the males are rendered as uncaring people and are another obstacle Niara has to overcome, along with her dilemma about school and home. Cecelia thought Jawan might be able to sit down and talk with her (coming from the same open-minded position that the girls did who allowed there were some problems they'd go to a male with), but she was the only girl who didn't imagine him as more of an enemy than a friend. In their co-construction of the story, the girls used their power to "get back at" males. Similarly, the girls who believed that Niara would eventually decide to drop out of school (Truette and Yolanda) used their feminine power to make a negative statement about the value of schooling. Intelligence plus imagination (and experience) decided the girls' opinions early in the story.

Feminine Perspective

A way of thinking about the girls' shaping of the story is to say they (by employing their power) put a feminine stamp on two situations that, in the original story, were definitely male-structured: the school and the home. The school was a typically unfemale institution, and the home, because of the imposition of "woman's work" on Niara (and the lack of any domestic work for the brother), reflected patriarchal mores. Jawan, the boyfriend, was, of course, part of the masculine structure of things, too. But when Niara rebelled against the other two male-factors, she positioned herself to eventually rebel against Jawan, too. After

all, if he was just going to "be there" without being an active advocate for Niara's feelings, he could be said to be against her or simply not worth bothering about.

The world that the eighth graders created for Niara was one imbued with creative opportunity and freedom from patriarchy, in most cases. She would be on her own, have her own things, and be her own woman if she stayed in school and triumphed over that male-built obstacle. If she failed to stay in school, other male-influenced problems would be her downfall: single motherhood and resultant poverty. She needed to think of and for herself.

To conclude this section, talking-with as teaching has proved to be an effective teaching method with the girls in the Niara study because of its congruency with connected-knowing, the girls' African-American culture, and its affective inducement of intellectual knowing. Talking-with as teaching capitalizes on the girls' experience in a way that helps them learn from the past while contemplating a better future. The next section expands on the talking-with philosophy by introducing explicit language concerns into the pedagogical picture.

VII. The Language of Learning: "How They Want Us to Talk—White?"

It was good to be leaving with things set partly right again. Daddy had surprised her. When Mama made him understand that Niara wanted to leave school because she felt she was losing herself there, he came and apologized to her. He said he hadn't really been listening to her because he thought the real reason was that she was becoming "boy crazy" over that "worthless Jawan." He hadn't understood what school was doing to her. He left school for a similar reason in eighth grade, he said. He was the biggest, oldest kid in the country school he'd attended because he had to help out at home a lot, too. The teacher would humiliate him by making him sit with the younger children each time he didn't "get his lesson" properly or made a grammatical error in speaking. One day, he had enough. He tossed the teacher behind her own desk and never went again. "That's your old man in you, girl, that makes you fight back," he declared, and gave Niara a pleased peck on the cheek. "Your Mama and I have a surprise for you tomorrow."

They really came through for her. She was going to Mamaw's right away, without having to work for her fare. They bought her ticket and even found an antique curio for her to take to Mamaw as a gift from them all. And if they could afford it, the family would take the long drive south to visit her next summer.

But her brother said he wouldn't come. Said he didn't care if he never saw her again because of the chores, the "girl's work" he had to do now. When he appealed to Daddy, Daddy said maybe it's a good idea that he who creates messes helps to clean them up, and winked at Mama and Niara.

Mama said she would go up to the school and get a proper transfer for Niara when she enrolled in the new school at Mamaw's. Niara, though, wasn't planning to go to school for several weeks. She wanted some time off to talk to Mamaw, to rediscover the town, and to do some visiting. She wanted some time to herself to be herself. She had to know who she was before she went to school again. Only by being secure in knowledge-of-

Niara could she use their education. Very few teachers would understand that. She prayed for just one who would be her friend, and maybe help her navigate the waters.

Right now, she didn't have time to think about those things. She had good-byes to say, a nonstop flight to catch, and a beautiful grandmother probably already at the airport waiting for her. Her future was beginning. And she was ready to learn all the things it would teach her.

The talk with her father finally helped Niara "connect" with him and provided some insight into his personality. She was, indeed, his daughter. She hadn't liked being degraded and embarrassed in school, either. For her, it was the general attitude toward students, being treated like she was stupid; for him, it was the language issue. But he didn't allow himself to be silenced like some other students did. He fought back and quit.

The troubling standard English issue touched the Niara study unexpectedly three different times. The first time was peripherally last year when the eighth graders were in seventh grade. It was during a spring fieldtrip about two months before the end of the school year. It was an ideal, sunshiny day, and our group of about 40 (Mr. Penni's English-drama students plus chaperones) was walking across the Michigan State University campus in East Lansing, sightseeing before time to take our seats for a performance at Wharton Center. Yolanda was walking companionably beside me on my left, and some other girls were walking, talking together, on my right. I gave some oral direction to the group behind us, probably in response to a question, and Yolanda said, irritatedly, "Why do you talk like that?"

"Talk like what?" I said, surprised.

She then mimicked what I had just said to the group behind, leaving no doubt in my mind that she was talking about the standard English I customarily spoke.

"Why do you talk the way you do?" I asked her evenly in return.

"I talk like Black people. . ." she tried. "Why . . .?" She became embarrassed with the topic, my question, and her bravery in broaching the subject, I think. She also didn't quite know how I was taking this.

"Yolanda," I said, "I guess I talk the way my friends did, growing up, the way you talk like yours. OK?"

"Uh-huh," she replied, wanting to get off the topic, and we did.

The second time was this year in drama circle when Deirdre said, unkindly, to Michelle, "Why you talk like that?" and some of the group giggled. Michelle's vocal intonation is the closest in the group to standard English, although she uses Black English expressions and phraseology like the other girls. Since Deirdre had violated the "protected space" agreement for the drama circle (and since I was still seething about Rev. Al Sharpton's appearance on "Sixty Minutes" the night before, in which he sarcastically and divisively put down the speech of African-Americans who speak standard English and are bicultural), I gave her a piece of my mind, saying:

Everybody talks the way they want to. What's wrong with that? There's no such thing as one right way for Black people to speak. Why should there be? We come in all kinds of sizes, colors, hair, from all over the world. So how can there be just one "approved" way to talk? Did you all see Rev. Al on TV last night? Well, he was knocking other Black people again, ones who are different than he is. Ladies, ladies, we need to stop

this stabbing each other in the back! We're in enough trouble in this country as it is. Please pay attention to what people say and not how they say it from now on.

The group sobered up considerably by the end of my speech. I made it clear that my words were not for Deirdre alone, but for all of us.

I suppose my response to Deirdre's making fun of the way Michelle talks was really the one I would have liked to give, in milder form, to Yolanda last year. I hadn't been satisfied with my reply to her and would have liked it to be more educational than it was. I didn't want to preach at her, though, or make her feel sorrier that she'd asked me her question. She and I were tenuous friends by that time, and I believe she asked a question that had been puzzling her a long time from the relative safety of that developing relationship. I wanted the overtures of friendship to remain, and besides, I was the one who told her to voice her questions more freely in this life.

Deirdre's question was related to her flibbertigibbet adolescent personality and probably to an unfavorable association in her mind between "talking White" and acting Black. Some of the other girls had thoughts on the subject and related these to the subject of education. Dawn asked, "Mrs. Muller, do you get a better education at a Black or a White college?" Most of the girls had heard that you get a better education at a Black college and wanted to go to one. I told them that going to a Black college didn't mean that they didn't need to use standard English sometimes, to "code switch." I told them about the studies that

said some White people couldn't understand Black English and that people in general looked down on people who spoke it outside the community.

Jimmi said that was what happened to her mother: she was "smart," but her high school counselor had steered her away from college because she spoke Black English. "But," protested Dawn, "how they want us to talk if they don't want us to talk Black-White?" Her question brought forth a chorus of indignant protests from others before we returned to the matter of Niara's dilemma.

Mr. Penni and I had considered the question and place of oral standard English usage in the English-drama curriculum of our students at Penn Street. The formal curriculum assumed standard English in reading and writing, of course, but was ambiguous about the place of direct oral English instruction, seeming to assume that it would develop naturally from reading and writing familiarity. But this was not the case. Students resisted the use of spoken standard English in all situations except for short, cameo roles in drama that required brief statements in standard English.

We had been outstandingly unsuccessful the first year of our collaboration with our attempts to bring about more deliberately the use of oral standard English in the first English-drama class. This was to be combined with a unit on figurative language which we planned together and I taught. The lessons Mr. Penni and I developed were designed to begin with the students' own colorful use of spoken and written language and use those as a bridge to standard English figurative in speaking and writing. The students showed tremendous

enjoyment of stories that I wrote about them, using their own idiomatic expressions and African-American turns of phrase. We composed others together. But when it was time to move back into the textbook or to translate their phrases and sentences into standard English phrases and sentences, they balked. They lost interest. They could see no reason for "changing" their talk in any way, not even in a game format, and Mr. Penni and I were unable to convince them that these activities had some importance.

He and I believed that the students had a repugnance toward speaking "White," even though all of their teachers used standard English. They expected him to use it, and since they accepted him, they accepted his usage of it. But my case was different. I didn't speak the mainstream lingo with the urban-southern inflection that numerous Black faculty in the building did, although I am from an African-American southside neighborhood in Chicago. The students couldn't understand it. They and I got along generally well together, but I didn't sound like them. They decided I sounded different because I have lived overseas, and that was the end of that. Because the oral standard English "stuff" was not part of the regular English curriculum—and they knew it—they could not be induced.

The truth of the matter is that standard English usage is a value with which I grew up. Learning to speak standard English well was proof to the family that you were being properly educated. Ours was a working-class family, but we children had to watch how we spoke. A few of our playmates were White, but the desire for their children to speak "well" was a universal one of Black parents in

the neighborhood, independent of White presence. It was one they possessed when they moved into the neighborhood. I attended an all-Black high school, but the speech heard there was much more mainstream than any I have heard in Penn Street and its environs.

In those days, the idea was to integrate. Therefore, acceptable speech had to be learned. That was unlike the present-day attitudes of students at Penn Street (and many other places in these post-Civil Rights times) whose desired affiliation with the mainstream is to make-their-money-and-run back to where they are comfortable—among Blacks.

The collaborating teacher and I felt that, in the absence of a mandated formal oral English curriculum, there was little that we could do (that we were not already doing) to encourage the students to practice code-switching, but residual feelings about our failure remained. They return each time I discuss the Penn Street collaborative English-drama work at a conference or other meeting of teachers. African-American teachers with senior status or many years of teaching always ask how we are going about teaching oral standard English to the students. I explain our disquieting quandary.

The standard English issue is embedded in other issues and is a complex one. It is part of controversies involving cultural congruency in the classroom, self-esteem of African-American students, so-called anti-intellectualism in Black youth, White hegemony, and Black nationhood. It is also a touchy, value-laden psychosocial matter: why should involuntary minorities (to adopt Ogbu's term),

who have seen the gains of the Civil Rights era topple one after another and whose poor are increasing exponentially, speak the language of the massa? One reality of the subject touches economic concerns, obviously: that African-Americans who would succeed in preparing for and attaining some of the higher-paying professional and semi-professional occupations must learn written and oral standard English well. Weems (1993) alluded to this when she said studies have found that youths "who speak nonstandard dialect are viewed as being less intelligent by teachers" (p. 76) and that even African-Americans' perception of the speech of other African-Americans who speak nonstandard English is negative in relation to Blacks who speak White mainstream English (p. 79). And so, beyond the adolescent peer group culture, there remains a world unfriendly to the sound of Black English.

Weems's "Should We Teach Dialect in the Classroom?" supports Steele's (1992) conviction that African-Americans at every level of schooling labor under a continual "stigma" or perception by other people that anything Black is inferior. She also believes that being monolingual in Black English hampers students' progress in school and quoted the noted linguist O. L. Taylor as saying:

In the United States, the failure of the nation's schools to effectively teach standard English to nonstandard English speakers can be documented by the low performance of these speakers on a variety of achievement, aptitude, and diagnostic tests—in a decrease in the sense of self-worth among the students, lowered teacher expectations, and discipline problems linked directly or indirectly with communication. (p. 80)

My first two unexpected brushes with the standard dialect versus nonstandard dialect issue in the Niara study were value-linked or preference-

associated matters. They are both important and taxing affairs, but the third unforeseen encounter, one of actual communication, is the most crucial for teaching and learning. Every time I thought of how I might increase the drama group girls' use of standard English in a way that would not hinder their creativity and drive or freedom, I thought of the problem as one of encoding (or substituting mainstream English for Black) for a certain period of time. I did not realize that the difficulty had a sizable decoding (or comprehension) component, at first.

Deirdre was always asking me to repeat things. As I said before, I believed those requests, for the most part, were attention-getting ones. Occasionally, however, I was less certain. Knowing of her hearing loss and noticing the indistinct, peculiar way she had of expressing herself sometimes, I wondered what her true hearing acuity was. I would repeat a comment or direction for her, only to have her say again, after another sentence or two, "Huh? What you say?" I would say, for example, "We're going to do an activity where we're going to have one person sitting inside the circle talking to another person. Face-to-face. Bring a—" and she would interrupt with (after having seemed to attend to the business of the lesson) "What you say?"

Or I would say, "What do you think were some of the most important questions asked in the scene? What led to those questions being asked?"

And she would say, "Huh? What you askin' us?"

I would think that the problem was my multi-part questions and rephrase into a one-part question. That seemed to work better. But sometimes there were

others who appeared to have a similar problem hearing or understanding. Here is an example:

Me: OK, this is what we're going to do now: we're going to dismantle the church. What we're going to do now is a "back-sliding" scene. When people come through the door, they're going to revert. Do you understand what I mean?

Cookie: We're going to be made at the door?

Here is an example from an eighth-grade story-response student:

Me: She [Niara] wants some advice. Do you think she really wants to drop out? Why or why not?

Cecelia: No, she want a—, uh, a high school diploma [no elaboration].

And two other instances:

Me: All right, she doesn't need to go to college, as you say, but she can at least finish high school. What can her family do to improve her chance of finishing?

Truette: Uh, what can her family do?

Me: So she has her dreams and has a lot of advice now. What decision do you think she made, Truette, and why did she make it?

Truette: To drop out like her sister did [no elaboration].

In each case, until I found Truette having the same problem, I thought the partial answer, miscomprehension or vagueness on the part of the student, was mainly attributable to multi-part questions, although I couldn't quite understand why. These girls and I had conversed together for almost a year (in the case of the seventh graders) or more (in the case of the eighth graders), and I knew how intelligent they are, especially in anything that has to do with oral language. They never evidenced a "hearing loss" before, and a two- or three-part explanation or

question asked in the context of the work they were doing should have posed no problem for them. Collectively, their verbal memory was extraordinary; what was happening here? And, as for distractions, there were none, really. The drama girls and I were a small group in an empty auditorium, and the story-response girls and I worked one-on-one in satisfactorily quiet environments. I thought more about these new language problems the girls were having.

Deirdre did clown around frequently and "play to the audience," but I was convinced of her sincerity in not following me in the two examples previously cited. I questioned the accuracy of her auditory diagnosis. But I knew that couldn't be the whole answer because she did seem to understand better when I simplified my instructions or questions with no increase (that I was aware of) in vocal volume. Cookie's misunderstandings mystified me. I knew I had given longer instructions and had just talked with the girls extensively numerous times without her every having lost me before. Of course, in regular drama classes (not about Niara), I gave fewer directions and asked fewer questions because those things were the girls' responsibilities as they envisioned and structured improvisations. Cookie and Deirdre were sharp young ladies. I didn't understand these confusions of theirs.

Cecelia was a conscientious student and one who tried her best to please the teacher. Yet, all through her interview, I had to prompt twice to get an answer to a two-part question, and her single replies were short and unembellished. I knew her reluctance to make mistakes and say things that were

"wrong," but to consistently not answer all that was asked of her was completely out of character. With Truette, I first suspected emotional interference as the cause of her vague responses, anger at the school generalized to me. But when she said, "To drop out like her sister did," which was an incorrect answer according to the text of the story (Debra's sister dropped out, not Niara's), I finally allowed myself to acknowledge what was going on. It was interactional standard English they were not comprehending adequately.

I suppose it was my own uneasy feelings about knowing the students were not receiving specific standard English instruction on oral usage and my former lack of success in teaching it systematically to the first year's class that made it difficult for me to "hear" what I was hearing. Having taught English to Laotian, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Mexican children in English-as-a-second-language programs, I was aware of the need for and advantages of there being a space in the school's formal curriculum for oral English instruction. But I did not know how to make the school sensitive to the need. At Penn Street, students like Cookie who could not read near grade placement level and who did not qualify for Chapter One reading were being pushed through seventh and eighth grade without instruction and were also being repeatedly suspended from school when they disrupted because they could not do the work. It was that problem that Mr. Penni and I had pledged ourselves to address through our work on the school's literacy committee. (In the midst of abundant priority problems,

prioritizing the priorities became an intractable predicament.) Oral English was not a common scholastic concern in the building.

In our co-reading of "Niara's Dilemma," I had read the part to Truette that mentioned Debra's sister dropping out of school:

Her best friend, Debra, thinks she is crazy and urges her to stick it out at school and at home. But Niara isn't convinced: she feels school is just as bad as her home. They are both wasting her time, having her do juvenile things and follow too many stupid rules. After all, Debra's sister left home last year and seems to be doing fine. She has a job and a new car that Niara sees her cruising around the 'hood in. Being young, Black and female hasn't held her back any.

That paragraph was slower-than-conversation, well-articulated standard English read by me in a normal tone and volume. She had read the paragraph before that and would read the following one. If her attention strayed in between, she probably would have caught enough of the story context to recover, had the reading been in Black English, but as it was, she misunderstood a key part of the story. In the other instance of her not fully understanding, too, she gives evidence of listening for a meaning-accented word (such as exists in Black English but less often in standard English) and not hearing it spoken in a way that was compatible with her habitual listening. In the form of Black English spoken by the majority of the students whom I've taught in the school, the question (with altered syntax, of course) that I asked her would have been spoken as follows: "All right, she DOESN'T need to go to COLLEGE, as you say, but she could AT LEAST finish HIGH SCHOOL. What can her FAMILY do to IMPROVE her chance of FINISHING?" The multiple inflections of words in the

sentence provide for multiple auditory focuses because the stressed words are the ones that carry the main meaning in the sentence, and the listener subconsciously listens for them.

Without those inflections to guide her ears, Truette had to "pick her way through" a sentence with few listening guideposts. By the time I was through asking the question (and she had realized there were to be no auditory cues), she responded with the words that carried the most meaning for her: "Uh, what CAN her FAMILY do?"

This insight into Truette's listening comprehension sent me back to my tape recordings of the dramas and interviews held up to then in the study. I wondered how deep was the distress I was perceiving here? And how consistent it was with the "incomprehensions" of other students. The answers were that the problem was a very serious one, having significant implications for the way the girls were taught in their regular classrooms, and, yes, the listening troubles of the girls who expressed them were largely consistent with each other. My investigation was in three parts.

First, I looked at the Black English patterns of speech of the girls in the study (I did not exclude Kelly's speech from scrutiny in this probe because she lives around Black people and uses a southern-influenced speech pattern). I found that the majority of the girls speak an insular Black English more strongly ethnic in phraseology, inflection, and tone than was customary in students of this age in similar urban schools ten years ago. I noticed the speech immediately

when I came to the school three years ago and wrote in my notes that these children sounded as though they had interacted with only other African-Americans who spoke similarly all their lives.

The girls use phrases and expressions that are usually associated with older, substantially uneducated African-American people. Some of these are:

sho 'nough for sure enough

wor'some for worrisome

joog somebody for poking or stabbing

They use colorful idiomatic or slang expressions as appropriate in practically all speaking situations:

Jimmi: I'd straight out trip on 'em, meaning she'd absolutely have a fit or tantrum.

Dawn: Now she got the jack on there, meaning the police or other security are present.

LaDonna: She didn't need to shack with him, meaning not live together unmarried.

Their speech ranges from mildly to heavily Black English patterned. Cookie, Jimmi, Deirdre, and LaDonna speak a heavily patterned Black English, with the heavily emphasized or inflected meaning words strung together or connected by what I'd call filler words:

LaDonna: She SEEM nice and RESPONSIBLE, and all this OTHER type o' stuff, and she SEEM like she WANT to do what SHE WANNA DO, but she DON'T want to HURT her PARENTS and stuff like THAT, so THAT'S WHY she. . . .

Deirdre: If my best FRIEND want to DROP OUT, then I want to DROP OUT. Well, I'm TALKIN' 'bout like YOUR FRIEND drop out.

Cookie: Some PARENTS don't let their GIRLS OUT: some kids' MAMA don't LET them GO OUTSIDE and they be TOO STRICT on the KIDS.

Jimmi (as Deshonna's mother): I KNOW my BABY is RESPONSIBLE! DESHONNA'S not gon' let NOTHING happen to them KIDS while they is UP there. REMEMBER when WE all be TOGETHER? We used to TRUST Deshonna with the KIDS?

Most of the 18 girls in the study (about 12) spoke a less heavily stressed or inflected form of Black English. In speaking in this range, they also customarily used less body-English (large movements) and considerably fewer hand gestures. Queenie's speech style is typical, with a more standard-English-compatible structure and little or no slang unless talking casually to peers.

Queenie: Niara thinking about dropping out of SCHOOL and trying to get ADVICE from other people, whether she SHOULD drop out or not.

Girls who speak in this range are not as dependent on the various tenses and inflections of the "be" status- or helping-verb, but may omit "is" from their sentences regularly.

Michelle and Kelly use a Black-English-influenced speech, but in general, employ the intonation of standard English and mainstream syntax and rhythm. Michelle's voice is higher pitched than Kelly's (thus making her sound more "White" to Deirdre), whose voice is softer, deeper, and not noticeable as anything remarkably "different" to the local African-American ear. The speech of both girls is typical of their location in the midwestern United States.

The second thing I investigated was the relationship between the girls' speech and their reading performance. I considered the fact that the vast majority of the students at the school could be considered remedial readers—

students who read two or more years below their grade-assignment level as measured by a group ability test. I have already said that only a small percentage of the students at Penn Street are given remedial reading (or any kind of developmental instruction). These are usually the worst readers and/or the ones whose class schedule can be made to fit the hours of the reading program. Some of the girls in the middle range of Black English speakers are poor oral readers, reading choppily and mispronouncing fairly common words because they cannot anticipate well which standard English word would logically follow another one. Kelly and Michelle read at grade level, but the girls in the heavily accented range of Black English speakers (except for Jimmi, who reads with flair) seem to struggle the worst with oral and silent reading. Their ethnic language seems to be conflicting with "school language."

Like many poor readers, LaDonna, Deirdre, and Cookie prefer to read aloud, saying they can "understand it better" if they hear what they are reading. (This could also be another explanation for their love of oral play-reading.) As they read parts of the Niara story aloud, Deirdre and Cookie struggled to make sense of it (the girls do not have to read aloud if they do not wish to). In most instances, their struggle seemed to be as much with literal comprehension of a story written at a fifth-grade level as with the effort to read smoothly and gracefully. LaDonna, in the story-response group, read choppily throughout her entire share of text. She made many pronunciation errors and self-corrected two of them when the context told her she had pronounced incorrectly. She read

word by word for considerable lengths (three to five lines) when she was not confident about what she was reading. She made numerous errors that would have affected her proper understanding of "Niara's Dilemma," and I tried to correct these by incorporating them into the questions I asked her about the story. If she were reading the story as an assignment for a class, silently and without teacher help, she would have missed at least 50% of the questions (because open-ended replies are based on correct knowledge of the story). She would have missed them because she is an intelligent girl who could not handle the language. Truette is a poor reader who can write her own thoughts, but cannot easily read those of others written in mainstream English.

In general, it is fair to say that the 18 girls are required to read in school is a language that 16 of them do not speak or understand interactionally.¹

My third area of investigation centered on why the girls could not understand my use of oral standard English some of the time when I used it all the time in teaching them and otherwise interacting with them. I could find nothing very different in my use of speech from one time to another as I reread lesson transcripts. But then, I listened to the tapes again and became very surprised at what I heard. At the beginning of lessons I usually spoke standard English, as in the examples given. Shortly afterwards, I would begin using

¹What this means is that the girls can understand a movie but cannot use standard English well enough to do things with it: to follow and participate in a conversation; to become independent in learning; to do research on their own; to feel comfortable around people who use it.

elements of Black English in conversing with the class. My speech pattern would become more inflected, and I would change to a more listener-agreeable, rhythmical way of talking. Much of the remainder of the lessons, until the Niara study, would involve a high percentage of student talk as they orally conceptualized and constructed improvisations. My Black-English-patterned speech looked like this:

So, you think this DILEMMA—is not a FAMILY dilemma, then, or IS it? Is it just the SCHOOL'S problem, the GIRL'S problem, or WHAT?

So even if she's at a POOR school, she should WORK hard, that's what you're SAYING?

I asked you BEFORE to find three reasons for STAYING IN school. All your REASONS had to do with FUTURE rewards, GOOD things you'll get later ON for staying in school NOW. THIS TIME, I want you to think of DAILY rewards or good things TODAY for STAYING in school, the daily ENJOYMENT or whatever.

Like the girls, I would emphasize the most meaningful words of the idea I was trying to convey, and let my language provide many listening direction-pointers or guideposts. My rhythm was similar to theirs, and like the ability to anticipate words and meaning in a written text, rhythm and words combined to help them anticipate and make meaning of words, sentences, and ideas not necessarily part of their ordinary conversations. I am sure this is the pattern I used in casual conversation with them, too.

It was amazing to me that I had not realized before that I had been seduced by the girls' colorful, expressive way of speaking and believed that sessions were being conducted in standard English. I, like others of their

teachers, had thought that the girls had a more functional knowledge of mainstream English. I had acted on that untested assumption and because the students conducted a large portion of the class work independently, I did not realize the truth of the matter. If the class were not taught democratically and conversationally, and the girls had not felt free to say what they thought, they might have continued to smile agreeably without understanding (some of them!), and I might never have known that behind correct decorum lay a frustrated, uninvolved quiet.

When I discussed what I had learned about my subconscious adaptation to the students' style of speaking with Mr. Penni and other staff members, they felt that other teachers must be doing this, too, especially African-American teachers for whom elements of Black English would feel comfortable and familiar. Sensitive White teachers, too, we felt, adopted some of the rhythms and inflections. In classrooms in which this was not the case, students were undoubtedly talked "at" in short episodes of directional, explanatory, and/or disciplinary mainstream language.

It is clear to me from my vantage point of acute embarrassment that students need to be instructed in what Delpit (1988) called "the culture of power," which in this case is interactive oral standard English. She said,

The dilemma is not really in the debate over instructional methodology, but rather in communicating across cultures and in addressing the more fundamental issue of power, of whose voice gets to be heard in determining what is best for poor children and children of color. (p. 296)

To me, the issue is also over the girls' being able to acquire language tools now that will bring them greater rewards and artistry in the future in terms of (hopefully) opportunities for economic mobility and sociopolitical voice in this country. That is not to say that I am in favor of sacrificing a meaningful, holistic education in favor of a skills-based, "competency"-oriented education, should a child-friendly one become available. I am most definitely not. But I have taught immigrant children in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs who, with planned, sequential instruction in oral and written English, went on to do well in school, a standard English world. And these children were not the elite, preferred immigrants of educated parents. They were Laotian Hmong and Mexican students whose parents were uneducated in their own country and knew little English when they arrived in this country. The parents could not help their children with homework and were surviving on hardscrabble jobs. While it is true that some of those children may be able to look forward to more opportunities in the mainstream than African-Americans because of the perniciousness of the oppression directed toward Blacks, the point is that learning oral English (when it was formally included in the curriculum) was not a difficult undertaking when the unlearning of their native language was not required. And when students saw that school knowledge could be used for their own purposes, for the survival of their group, and for the betterment of self.

Smitherman (1977), however, cautioned against bi-dialectalism for African-American students, asserting that their knowing "White English"

guarantees little. She agreed that the issue is the acquisition of real knowledge that gives people the power to change themselves and society (p. 209). She quoted Carter G. Woodson as explaining,

The educational system, as it has developed both in Europe and America, is an antiquated process which does not hit the mark even in the case of the needs of the white man himself. . . . Even if the [Blacks] do successfully imitate the white, nothing new has thereby been accomplished. You simply have a larger number of persons doing what others have been doing. (p. 209)

Another side of the bi-dialectal (or bi-lingual) concern, however, relates to the subject of independence and creative living ability of females, to their attainment of enough knowledge and credentials to barter for careers and dreams. Unless they are taught one of the keys to credentials-securing—oral standard English and advanced ability in reading comprehension and writing—they cannot hope to compete with others (allowed the opportunity) nor gain access to the volumes of knowledge written by their own people and the oral histories of Black women who can serve as models and inspiration to them.

Acquiring the hallmarks of education has been an indisputable esteem-builder for countless numbers of African-American females. In Ready From Within (1986), Cynthia Stokes Brown's biography of the education-activist Septima Poinsette Clark, Clark related how she organized "freedom schools" for Blacks throughout the South for purposes of voter registration during the Civil Rights movement. She and her relative, Bernice Robinson, a hairdresser, organized the first school and Bernice taught a severely oppressed and degraded people to read and register to vote. Like her mother many years

before, the acquisition of these abilities compelled immense pride in the people. Of her mother's pride in her own education, Clark said (in Lanker, 1989): "The English schoolteachers in Haiti did a very good job with my mother, because they taught her how to read and write. That made her the proud soul she was all her life" (p. 164).

Ex-Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to be elected to Congress and a contender for the 1976 Democratic presidential nomination, is a powerful, articulate speaker of standard English who uses her ability in it for the progress of her Black people. She speaks, here, of the power of an educated African-American woman:

One of the things that's always been fascinating to me as I go across this country speaking before women's groups and on college campuses, is for white people to come up to me and say, "My God! You're one of the most dynamic speakers we've ever heard." And some of them say to me, "You must have been exposed to white people." These are white people who have not been exposed to an educated Black woman. (p. 106)

Similar to the subject of the conversational use of talk in the previous section, the controversy over Black students learning other-culture oral language norms addresses issues of authentic female voice in the educational arena, African-American power and position in society, and how far to compromise or negotiate for socioeconomic space now for an elusive brass-ring future in an unstable, demoralized society. The controversy centers on balancing immediate utility against vision and rights of the individual against the need of the African-American community to continue to survive as a distinctive people. The folly of trying to educate students in a language other than their own without first

teaching them that language is, thus, rendered as absurd (and damaging to students and to race relations in the country) as even thinking of trying to improve schools without:

- * recognizing and relieving the students' alienation.
- * valuing the students' need for some independence and inner freedom.
- * understanding how African-American girls' goals are tied to God and mother.
- * knowing that students consider talking-with as caring.
- * learning a great deal more about the ethnic culture of the children being schooled.

Around the topic of the girls' use of language it must be remembered that the girls' own Black English represents a connective life force to them, rendering their continued coherence to self, to family, to community, to culture. To what matters most, overwhelmingly, to them. Standard English, on the other hand, represents a utility, a transport from home to a different world, but not always back again. And it is for this reason that the strategies for including oral standard English instruction in the students' educational program must be handled sensibly and sensitively. In no way must an offensive judgment seem to accompany it, or an attitude on the part of the school that the students' original way of speaking is another of those "deficits" to be made up.

The students have seen that, for many, the price of acquiring speaking competence in standard English is too high: you buy that language-culture and lose your own. For with the different way of speaking for purposes of breaking

through to the mainstream comes a different way of thinking, of appreciating, and—too often—of being. People "on the other side" who accept you do so at the denigration of your home culture. So even though it does appear that speaking standard English is necessary, in most instances, for successful mingling and economic mobility in the societal mainstream, it is full of peril for a Black female who is not absolutely sure of who she is and who is oppressed on the inside. Learning to speak standard or White English represents the overcoming of one hurdle only to encounter a potentially more deadly one: self-separation, or eventually, in utter emotional disarray, driving off the "bridge." Mastering the language, culture, and symbols of success were all not enough to keep prize-winning journalist Leanita McClain from succumbing to the soul-searing effort of having "a foot in each world" (Page, 1986). The following was written about her after her suicide:

Interviews and some of her remarkably revealing childhood writings make clear that McClain's struggle to resolve grave personal identity problems was compounded by the unusual stresses faced by Blacks who undertake the long journey from a childhood in the ghetto to jobs in white-dominated professions. These racial pioneers may possess special reservoirs of eloquence, as did McClain. But they must withstand enormous strains of isolation that whites seldom encounter in achieving similar success. (p. 3)

In Volunteer Slavery: My Authentic Negro Experience, Jill Nelson portrayed her experiences as a Black professional woman in the mainstream.

A reviewer (Jones, 1993) said of her trials:

Anyone who thinks making it in mainstream America is effortless for "qualified minorities" has not begun to walk even an inch in those shoes. If you're Black and you've achieved some measure of success, you become an instant anomaly if you mention that racism still exists and still

hinders and frustrates you. Outspokenness is often perceived as hostility, a differing viewpoint as a lack of team spirit. . . . Nelson dares to address what many Blacks in the mainstream often sidestep: how it can often be incredibly lonely and painful when there's no respect for the differences you bring to the table. (p. 7H)

In light of the things just discussed, it seems clear that the girls' resistance to "talking White" and giving more than absolutely necessary for an education that is White mainstream, also, does not emerge from an anti-intellectual realm, the charge made against contemporary African-American youth in America's schools. The youths' resistance is born in the struggle to retain their Blackness, their strength, in a society that is structured to always admit (and then inhumanly pressure) no more than a few "worthy Blacks" no matter what they do. In view of the thousands of unemployed, underemployed, and never-employed Black youths looking for work, those with diplomas and without, those with degrees and without, their logic gains credence. In a tight economy, their unemployment, imprisonment, and impoverishment give work to Whites, they assert, and all the schooling in the world won't change that. Not even everybody in the ghetto learning to "talk White."

When and if, however, the speaking of standard English and the writing of it are presented to students strictly as a means of communication, the one common language possible for Blacks of the diaspora and other peoples, they become valuable tools. They then possess a Black utility beyond dominant society norms and manipulation. They then offer a reason for becoming educated beyond the elusive carrot-on-the-stick routine and present a way for

Black knowledge, beliefs, and cultures to survive and be transmitted reciprocally to Blacks throughout the world. When the middle-aged African-American political activist, Fannie Lou Hamer, visited Africa in 1964, the sixth-grade-educated ex-sharecropper said of her visit:

Being from the South, we never was taught much about our African heritage. The way everybody talked to us, everybody in Africa was savages and real stupid people. . . . I saw Black men flying the airplanes, driving the buses, sitting behind the big desks in the bank, and just doing everything that I was used to seeing white people do. (Rubel, 1990, pp. 115-116)

Through the vehicle of oral and written standard English, American Blacks may be able to end the insularity which external oppression has caused and gain knowledge and inspiration from other Blacks in the world. Hamer's first-hand look at the progress of Blacks in Africa gave her renewed strength, and she "returned to Ruleville (Mississippi), to her own people, to organize" (p. 116). Had she known about and been able to communicate with Blacks in the wider world earlier, it might have made a tremendous difference in her life.

Without a doubt, the annual observation of Black Heritage month in the school is not enough to strengthen the girls at Penn Street in a significant way. Each year, many of the same heroes and heroines return with speeches and deeds approved by the school's power structure. Dead Black people are not necessarily motivating to students. Recently, Mr. Penni showed ("ten class periods worth") the film "Sarafina!" to his classes. The students were "rapt" all through the viewing, and afterwards one girl said to Mr. Penni, "You really care about us, don't you?" But another girl made a comment that is more illuminating

for this particular conversation. After expressing her deep enjoyment at seeing students who fought back against oppression but who stopped the violence in time so that they would not descend as low as the oppressors, she said, "But, Mr. PENN!! That can't be AFRICA!! They have HOUSES and CARS like WE do!!!!"

The students still internalize the stigmas about being Black and having African ancestors. The Black Heritage observances are predominantly outside their real lives, questions, and needs and therefore remain ceremonial. But facility in oral standard English would make it possible for them to talk with Blacks from outside the United States and see education in a larger context, one that has personal benefits for them beyond obtaining a job. Speaking oral standard English in the settings in which they need to can be empowering and educational for them.

The girls like me and like to hear my stories, sometimes, about my travels. When they ask me to retell some particular story about Okinawa, Guyana, or The Gambia, though, they question me closely afterwards, not quite always believing that others so far away are as much like us as I say and that I found it so comfortable being in such places. They have nothing to subsume this information to. "Tarzan" on the TV has made it impossible, at this point, for them to believe in a good, congenial, uplifting Africa. In the school, students say Black is Beautiful and wear Kinte cloth and green-black-and-red jewelry, but still call each other "nigger."

These students still live with the spectral residue of slavery and all the lies and mythologies that the White Reconstruction hegemony bred. There can be no doubt about that. And there can be no doubt that, unless their schooling comes to grips with these, the students—both consciously and unconsciously—will largely continue to resist much of the education that is offered them. However, it offers a kind of poetic justice that the slavemaster's language has the power to proffer a kind of liberation to contemporary African-American students. If it is offered in that way, and not as another kind of esteem-lowering educational welfare. The students need to converse with Black students from Africa, Germany, Brazil, Sweden, and other places in order to view their education in a world context. They need to see that the selective speaking of White English can be empowering. The girls need to talk long talks with beautiful African girls and women who have not internalized oppression and who come to the United States to learn in order that they may return home and help uplift their people. They need to learn White English with a Black perspective.

Failing such an approach to the teaching and learning of oral standard English, I think it is safe to say that Black students will continue to have a hostile regard toward the speaking of White English. As the girl in the following poem does:

"Language of Lies"

They can't make me
speak
the language of lies
required
by the curriculum,
at the school
I go to.

They call it
correct English
and I call it
corrupt English
about everything
they think
of us.

I write the papers
get the grades
and wish
I could dispose
of their language
like I do
my papers
before I go home.

VIII. Summary and Conclusion

The construction of a girl named Niara and her dilemma about school is now complete--as far as the study per se is concerned. In another way, it is unfinished. Niara's meaning and struggle are different for each girl who participated in the study, and each participant will complete "Niara's Dilemma" by living out her own tale of remaining in school or dropping out. The Niara whom the girls and I developed is the personification of ideas, comments, attitudes, and questions from all the girls. Niara went down South to continue her schooling because the majority of the girls thought that she should or would remain in school. She planned to take a few weeks' hiatus from school-education, though, because Yolanda, LaDonna, and Truette maintained she would drop out. Whether or not she actually enrolled in high school down at Mamaw's is thus uncertain. Etta's and Michelle's specific comments about their own mothers gave Niara's mother her patient, loving personality, and Etta's comments that dads don't give much "slack" created a father who had a problem relationship with his daughter. However, Jimmi's perception that fathers and other males can be sympathetic and/or empathetic helped repair their bond in the end. Whitnee's telling us that her brother once ran away rather than help in the house helped construct a brother who was deeply resentful of doing housework. Deirdre's emphatic question: "How GOD going to HELP her?" linked up with the

girls' talk of "feelings" to give Niara her "sign" about what she should do. And so on. Girls from both the drama and story-response groups constructed a "sister" who reflected their thinking in as many ways as possible.

The thinking that the conception of Niara was designed to capture was around the specific question:

Do these middle school African-American girls believe it is better to remain in school until graduation or drop out before then--and why?

This question attempted to capture, as a corollary, the meaning of schooling to the girls at Pennsylvania Street Middle School. Subsidiary questions were:

1. How are the girls' reasons for staying in school or desiring to drop out related to their life-views and goals?
2. How do traditional expressive vehicles of African-Americans--drama, poetry, and story--help to illuminate the girls' thinking?
3. In what ways may being aware of the girls' voices help the school to educate them more sympathetically and effectively?

The answer to the main question is that the majority of the girls in the study believed that Niara and they should/would remain in school until graduation, but for reasons educators are ordinarily unaware of, in some instances. What school means to the girls is a slight opportunity for an employed future bought at a tremendous price. That price is diminished personal artistry or opportunity for creativity and independence. The price is limited educational attainment bought with a depression-causing conformity that may render these girls incapable of one day combatting external oppression with the internal freedom that has carried generations of Black women through. A fuller look at

the findings will follow a summary of the study design and method. Educational recommendations are in the final section.

Study Design and Method

The experiential (participatory) arts design actualized through theme lessons in improvisational drama, lesson-extending poetry, and story-response interviews all centering on "Niara's Dilemma" proved a remarkable way of probing the thoughts of 18 adolescent girls. Drama provided the most detailed, comprehensive means of understanding the girls' thinking on the focal questions. Poetry added their introspective insights and story-response their individual responses when available time and procedures were limited. While seventh-grade drama yielded the richest portrait of the girls' reflective viewpoints, story-response enabled former drama students, the eighth graders available from their teachers for only a limited amount of time, to reflect individually on the problem. In that way, story-response was a valuable supplement to drama. Poetry could have been used to enhance or extend the responses of either the drama or story-response group, but I used it following drama because of the just-mentioned limited participation of the eighth graders and because of the excellent poetry that drama ordinarily stimulates. The seventh-grade girls' poems and writings were self-projective and sensitive to Niara's predicament.

All methods were improved by my prior experiences with the subjects over a one- or (nearly) two-year period and by my having worked in drama and classrooms with students at Penn Street for three years. Stories and insights

gained from those observations and associations helped me comprehend, connect, and better analyze what was learned in the fieldwork. It would have been possible to conduct my inquiry within the parameters of the three arts alone, but the total data would have been far less rich and informative.

It is obvious to me after conducting this study that qualitative research employing probes through experiential arts has something important and student-revealing to add to schoolhouse ethnographic research. However, it must be realized that arts lessons used for research purposes become necessarily more teacher-directed in meeting time frames and addressing target questions than ordinary arts instruction, and a fine line is walked to "keep the artistry in" and prosaic pedagogy out.

Open-ended story-response answers in a one-on-one situation are not as spontaneous and free when talking ties between interviewer and subject have been inactive for a period of time. I would not do the story-response as a series of individual activities again, but would have three or four girls engage in a natural, call-and-response conversation around free-form questions based on the story. I believe that a more ordinary speaking situation would draw forth more complete, detailed responses. Also, girls interacting together would probably take the talk into richer veins than I would be able to think of in planning. Findings, therefore, would be based on more substantial data in that area.

Main Findings

A pervasive counter-synchrony factor highlighted by this "Niara study" is the disparity of goals between the school (and its PDS reform program) and the girls, as citizens of the local community. The school appears to believe that education is mostly about improved pedagogy, but the girls-cum-community believe it should be about that as well as helping kids steer their way safely/strongly through a life that becomes more problem-ridden for African-Americans each day. The school looks at test scores and drop-out rates, but the girls and community look at human misery inside the school and without. In other words, there is a conflicted sense of mission between school and clientele. A discordant vision between positivism and people, although "teaching everybody's children" is a widely touted saying by the reformers.

Analysis of data from the study, combined with notes from previous lessons and observations, points to the need for a settlement-house model in supporting the girls through school. But the school offers little counseling, limited social services, and no medical attention. Penn Street is deeply committed to the excellence-in-education movement that generally separates teaching from real-life perils of students. The community is in need of jobs, renovation, and hope, but the school is not preparing students who leave its portals with a real message of possibility. And while both sides recognize some special urgency (the religious groups lead this awareness) to work with African-American young men, African-American girls suffer abuse and harassment within the school and suffer

from many artistry-diminishing needs that almost no one is doing anything about inside or outside the school. The main categories of concern relating to the girls staying school or dropping out are as follows:

A. Identity and alienation. The findings in this category may best be summarized by saying that the girls feel, largely, that they are treated as if they "don't belong" in their own school. Too many insensitive teachers, rules, poor rewards for work; fighting among girls; and domineering attitudes of males constitute a harsh separation from the affectiveness of elementary school. Girls long for the structure and security of their old elementary schools and teachers. Favorite teachers at Penn Street are ones who spend time talking with the girls and establish affective environments in their classrooms.

The voicelessness and forced dependency (and other negatives) are in extreme conflict with the developmental tasks of early- and middle-adolescent girls (the girls in the study are 12 to 15 years old). Youths who, developmentally, have a need to question, to experiment, to grow in independence are forced to exist in an alienation-breeding milieu of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, and disconnectedness. Although their school is termed "middle school," which is a concept to support the human growth needs of adolescents, it is actually a junior-high-styled institution with separate classes, rotating periods, and academic and behavioral expectations incompatible with students who have recently left the sheltering, familial atmosphere of elementary school.

Equally as damaging to the personal artistry-development function of these young ladies is the tendency of some male teachers to take the girls less seriously than the boys, to let them "slide," and hold lower expectations for them. This phenomenon is doubly damaging to girls attending a school in which burned-out teachers give little homework and the student body does practically none.

Even more detrimental than the school's lackluster tendencies in actively supporting emotional, social, and physical needs of girls is its minimalist attitude toward incorporating pertinent aspects of the African-American worldview in educating African-American students. Aside from some posters on the wall and the annual observance of Black Heritage month, the values, thinking, learning style, spirituality, and "need to be connected" (to self and others) are not conspicuously honored in the girls' education.

Sparkling, spirited, delightful girls who come to Penn Street in seventh grade show easily detectable symptoms of stress and depression by eighth grade. Young ladies who are forced to construct a significant portion of their identity as females in that setting do so in a male-dominated institution that says to them to be successful there is largely to be dominated, victimized, unfulfilled, and basically unhappy.

B. Independence and recognition. There is a stark and colossal difference between the way the girls see themselves and the way the school's organizational structure permits them to be seen. Much of the way the girls see

themselves as they come into the school and try to exist there stems from an empowering perspective of God. They see themselves as esteemed beings, worthy of communicating with God, but the school regards them as rowdy children needing to be held in check by oppressive rules and teacher supremacy.

In the home environment of girls who are from poor African-American families, the girls are apt to be engaged in performing independently and regularly (from an early age) adult tasks because of the need for parents to work long hours away from home in order to earn a subsistence-level living. They resent and rebel at being thrust into totally subservient and dependent roles within the school—under the guise of "education." Even girls who do not physically disrupt classes or become overt disciplinary cases support students who are "wronged" (suspended, expelled, detained) by such a system and lose respect for teachers who impose it upon them. For girls who feel strongly about their lack of rights within the school, contemplating dropping out is the only way they see to retain their self-respect, self-esteem, and inner freedom.

What was very apparent in the field work is the desire of these affectionate girls to be noticed and cared about. When these are foremost needs, girls do not sit quietly in class nor respond positively to those persons and rules that would desolate them further. They subvert the procedures of the classes by ignoring them or actively or passively defying them, in accordance with their needs and predispositions.

Teacher-centered, undemocratic educations in which "meanings, importances, and connections [are] all the property of the teacher. . . . You could be right or wrong at the whim of a teacher" (Study, p. 53) keep the girls dependent upon the teachers for learning and recognition. Students whose interpretive frames, experiences, and learning styles are far different from their middle-class teachers'. Three girls, Jimmi, Whitnee, and Kelly, were highlighted in this category to demonstrate how important a feeling of independence is to the girls, affectively and intellectually. And a comment of Dawn's was offered to show how important recognition is to the girls. When I sought their assent to participate in the study and explained about subject confidentiality, the girls were dismayed. "What?" said Dawn, with acute disappointment in her voice, "You not going to say my name?!"

C. Mother love. The school does not appreciate how much it needs to recognize the girls' relationship with their mothers and to have a positive concept of their mothering in order to educate the girls well. These stigmatized, unheralded heroines occupy a supreme place of respect in the hearts of most of their daughters. The mutual love between them and the talk and confidences that occur are among their daughters' highest values. The girls trust in the power of their mother and other-mother figures to be supportive in good times and bad. Most endure school in order to make their mother proud of them.

Family is a cherished possession of the girls in the study, and the lack of a feeling of "family" in their education at Penn Street is detrimental to their

progress there. In order to progress, there needs to be closeness, connectedness, trust, and mutual valuing and respect among students and between students and teachers. Once again, the teachers to whom the girls resonate are the ones who teach in a role akin to that of a parent figure and talk to them, show caring, and demonstrate regard. In my three years at Penn Street, I have heard girls casually mention family members with pride and affection numerous times within the dailiness of things. In fact, talk of their family is simply a regular part of their ordinary conversation, almost as if they can't stand to leave family behind in the course of their schooling, or just feel more comfortable by holding them close.

"Other-mothers" are also held in high regard by the girls. These are other maternal, fond, caring, concerned women in the community and/or extended family who love them and have the ability to make a powerful difference in the girls' lives. If the school were to draw upon the services, insights, and wisdom of these women and establish mentoring or other attention-paying roles for them in the school, more girls may be able to realize the benefits of a life-connected, meaningful education that is compatible with their dreams and abilities. One absolutely vital function that these other-mothers could play is listening to these students. Not being listened to is one of their standard complaints against the school, and no teacher can teach them successfully who does not take some time to hear them. In the girls' minds, listening-to demonstrates caring, and caring is a highly mother- of family-related value.

It is likely that some girls who choose to drop out of school do so in order to "get back" at their mothers, where relationships are strained or negative. This represents a largely unexplored topic in drop-out research, but the girls in the study recognize that their graduating from high school is a top priority with their mothers, who value education for its own sake and for the protection from domestic work it has traditionally offered African-American females.

A high percentage of parent participation and visibility in the school, in and of itself, appears to be of benefit to students' attitudes toward their schooling. Although, as adolescents, they do not wish parents hovering closely over them in the presence of their peers, having overt parent participation in the school increases its meaningfulness and relevance to students.

D. Talking-with as teaching. Conversational methods used in drama class appear to satisfy many affective needs and academic goals in educating the participants in the study. They allow students to experience learning in a democratic, culturally appropriate, and active way. To students, these are some of the important characteristics of good teaching. The girls prefer learning situations in which they can understand linkages between what they are learning and various aspects of life, the "life connections." Conversational teaching affords them this insight because they can ask questions and probe until they gain insight.

To the girls, conversational methods render a teaching/learning situation more familial and lessen feelings of alienation stemming from teacher-centered

situations. Teaching as talking-with also implies teacher listening, another estrangement reducer, and teacher respect for the student, her life, her voice, her experience. The primary parallels between improvisational drama teaching/learning and talking-with as a classroom educational strategy are the following:

1. Pleasant context.
2. Time taken (with students).
3. Pleasant learning process.
4. Listening and responding being integral to the process.

The fact that students get to reply to the teacher and to each other in a conversational teaching situation is important to these students. The conventions of dominant-culture talk--turn-taking, hand-raising, and so on--as they apply to the classroom are incompatible with conversational styles of Black culture. African-American speech situations are involved, speaker- and listener-integrated times. The speaker expects the audience to orally support, further, and even contradict her. The audience, on the other hand, expects to help the speaker construct her speech by offering vocal encouragement, body-English support, and a word or two of its own. This traditional, typical African-American style is called "call-and-response" and is a feedback, participatory speech mechanism that contributes to student interest, learning, and knowledge development.

Oral methods are prevalent in African-American teaching. Children learning at home, at church, and in the community-at-large are exposed to stories, to rhymes, to memorized knowledge and are ordinarily expected to show their understanding of things learned by oral means. That is, recitation before writing (if the written is required at all). Many African-American ethnic teaching methods involve teaching-as-telling. These methods incorporate a high opinion of adept oral expressiveness, individual style, and (often) humor.

In the school, talking-with the teacher, as a learning strategy, gives students some power to negotiate their written and other work and to retain, thereby, some creative control and independence over what is expected. Work more easily commands a buy-in from students because it is transformed from "the teacher's work" to their own. Becoming freed up to talk, to have "voice," represents an empowering way of learning for the girls and is an artistry-enhancing, more holistic way of preparing them for future living and making a living. It is also a critical prelude to oppressed people gaining sociopolitical and economic parity.

E. The language of learning. Findings in this area extend the data on talking-with by addressing the controversy over how the conversations should best be engaged in by students—in standard (mainstream) English or in their own distinctive language, Black English. The matter of Black English versus standard English touches upon the sensitive issues of language hegemony, cultural congruence, student alienation versus student empowerment, the politics of

emancipatory education, and so on. It also is embedded in socially volatile thinking on Black nationhood, Black separatism, and the political conscientization of African-American youth.

In the Niara study, the subject of the appropriateness and legitimacy of Black English in the education of African-American girls is examined from a values-orientation and from a communication standpoint. I explored two instances in which girls in the study objected to the use of standard English in their immediate space. Other instances were scrutinized in which standard English presented a communicative impediment to student understanding. The communicative aspect, very important to teaching and learning per se, could not be separated from the values component, of course, but did bring the various controversies surrounding the standard English versus Black English issue (which is part of the national bilingual issue in education) into sharper focus.

First, some girls were found not to comprehend standard English on an interactional or usable level. They are accustomed to their own highly inflected language, which provides cues to understanding according to stressed words, and find in standard English few listening guideposts to meaning and importance.

Second, the girls' significant reading problems were found to be highly correlated with their lack of facility in spoken standard English. Not being competent speakers of the mainstream language made it difficult for them to anticipate correct words in context and to self-correct incorrectly called words.

Consequently, "Niara's Dilemma," written at about a fifth-grade level, proved difficult for some of them to comprehend adequately.

Third, even though learning to speak the language of the "culture of power" seems to offer benefits to the girls, there are psychological and social cautions against appearing to value "White English" over Black. One way of motivating students to acquire a better interactional grasp of standard English, however, would be to promote its use in the acquisition of greater ties with Africans of the diaspora (as a universal language) and more acquaintance with written Black knowledge that is not available otherwise.

Fourth, the girls' "anti-intellectual" attitude toward the use of White English can be seen more accurately as an effort to erect a safety zone around themselves, to keep secure in their own language-culture, as they are aware of some of the self-separating dangers of acquiring the language of a dominant, oppressive society. The data support the position that the girls can benefit to some extent from learning White English from a Black perspective.

Conclusion

This study supports my contention that the subjects are being harmed by attending school. Personal artistry, self-esteem, and future opportunities are being lost now. Staying in school now and suffering all the disempowerment that goes with it are being endured for the possibility of a better, economically mobile, and non-male-dominated tomorrow in the presence of few other options.

The school's vision of its educational mandate is generally a depersonalized one, consistent with the basics-competency climate of contemporary educational thinking. Overt affectives in the environment are largely missing from the school's sense of mission, which may be more correctly termed a task than a vision. Holistic needs of girls growing up in a largely male-dominated (by power if not by presence), working-class community diminished by unemployment, violence, and structural racism of the larger society are given little, if any, thought. While the focus is on saving the Black male, the organization, curriculum, methods, and climate of the school say that Black females must (as usual) wait their turn.

Learning for "understanding" and the idea of liberatory education, the vocabulary of reform and critical education thinkers, seem to be thought of by the school as able to occur in a cultural vacuum or in the absence of serious sensitivity to and consideration of the ethnic culture from which the students come. Equally dismaying (and amazing) is that so little curricular/structural thought in the school seems to recognize that middle-school-age girls are not high-schoolers and should be taught and regarded differently.

It is apparent to me that the needs and dilemmas of the girls in this stay-in-or-drop-out study cannot be significantly ameliorated under the thinking and traditions of current educational paradigms: the underling role of students, the superiority of teachers, the marginality of the community, the disconnectedness of knowledge, and the vastly unequal power relations between inhabitants of the

Penn Street educational milieu. What is required is a new structure in place of the old that values diversity (more than simply sloganizes it), respects students' voices, enables female equality, promotes active democracy, believes in broadly based knowledge, advocates human ecology, and is not fearful of students and teachers discovering themselves and each other as a legitimate goal of learning. What I am talking about is not (in the first instance) a matter of millage but of mindset. One that recognizes that the continued diminishment and deconstruction of American society is inevitable unless all available minds are prepared and empowered through reality-based learning (accompanied by some canonical knowledge). And a concomitant dedication to righting the deliberate myths and lies that contribute to the social oppression of Blacks and the shackling of the mainstream American mind.

In the final section, I will delineate what a new-concept educational "structure" should "look" like, but for the present will merely say that the undetonated world I hope for must be created, not just by the participation of African-American females, but by their leadership. This means that creative and independent Black women, absolutely certain of their artistry and free to let it take them wherever it leads, can teach, inspire, cajole, preach, and model for a dispirited society how it, too, can "get over." Through poetry, dance, drama, singing, sewing, cooking, discovering, experimenting, and so on, the spirit of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Mother Hale can teach the country about the importance of being, the concept of sharing, the recognition

that a granule more than "enough" starts us down the road to disaster, and that love means living with the world, not against it. These are the possibilities being lost at this moment as girls are being compelled to dissemble their way through a mandatory miseducation steeped in a standard of a product-oriented, manufactured, violent, and fragmented inner and outer world.

Even if the world is not ready for the precious gifts of the adolescent ladies at Penn Street, there is such a lot of good they can do in their own community, as future mothers and active citizens, by receiving a more sympathetic, humane education. As presently schooled, however, even many girls who do stay in school through the twelfth grade will leave school diploma-less because of exit-test requirements that disconnected, overly abstract schooling in an "other" language has not equipped them to pass. Those who do acquire a diploma will have acquired little useful knowledge and no guarantee of employment.

One important thing must be mentioned. That is, that in presenting these findings and interpretations, it may appear that I have maligned all faculty and support staff at Penn Street, and this was never my intention. Besides my collaborating teacher, Mr. Penni, whom I have mentioned extensively, there are some other exemplary professionals holding on at Penn Street. But social problems and a rigid school structure that make successes and "uphill caring" taxing and increasingly difficult each year prompt me to say that this research is for them, too, in order to demonstrate that many of the students (the vast majority), with a better-conceived way of educating, can probably become again

the responsive, funny, progressive kids we all love to teach. That joy is still possible. That, if we improve their resilience, it will improve ours, too. That if we respect them, they will respect us. And that if we teach them well, we will learn more than we ever dreamed possible from these young people.

Otherwise, the lament of this disappointed, failed student, a true sister of Niara, will continue to haunt our work, our hearts, and our nation.

What's the Point?

I thought this had a purpose,
Coming to this building every day.
I thought this place would help me
Learn the intelligent way.

I thought I'd see some progress,
Every day coming to class,
But I've found nothing useful,
Just sitting here on my ass.

When will I ever need to know
The square root of sixty-three?
Coming here every day wasting my time
Just really bothers me.

180 days a year
For twelve years of my life,
And what have I to show for this
Except a lot of strife?

If I make it in the real world,
It won't be due to school.
It'll be because of all the years
I knew I was no fool.

--Charisse

IX. Recommendations for Education

There is no doubt in my mind that public education as we know it is unable to meet the needs of the girls at Penn Street. Its purpose is primarily a transmissive one—that is, to school students in the history, values, and attitudes of the dominant culture. For a truly transformative mission/vision of the kind necessary to meet the human, holistic, and intellectual needs and gifts of African-American adolescent girls involved in a struggle for selfhood and survival, a very different kind of institution is required. This new-concept school will be an innovative departure from what currently exists in terms of goals, curriculum, organization, and teaching concept.

It will also be different in terms of formation and administration. The new Penn Street Middle School will be formed by a coalition or collaboration of educational, community, social, medical, and proactive juvenile justice interests in the city. The purpose will be to have (a) articulation among elementary, middle, and high schools in the area and (b) partnership input from families and community organizations as well as from (c) juvenile/family service-providers on a preventive basis (as much as possible). Representatives of parents' and women's groups will not just participate, but share leadership in fashioning a female-friendly (and thus all-student-responsive) educational approach. A nonprescriptive advocacy toward students at Penn Street will be taken in order

to ensure that girls receive sensitive consideration in every stage of the planning of goals, curriculum, organization, and teaching (including teacher preparation).

Goals

Improved education for girls will be just one facet of a communitywide educational resurgence dedicated to restoring hope, self-help, and respect for nonindoctrinating actual education. The main aims will be to combat the emotionally crippling effects of the stigmatization of Africa, the restoration of Black knowledge to a position of regard, unbiased mainstream knowledge to a respected place, and the pursuit of excellence and equity through teaching and learning. Teaching would be thought of as "reaching," and each student privileged with learning would recognize an obligation to "pass it on" through homes, churches, businesses, and other organizations to those less privileged in an each-one-teach-one "paradigm" of the "new" education. Key to this educational resurgence would be specific teachings on nonsexism based on modern-day legalities and realities as well as on historical teachings about illustrious African women (such as Queen Moo, Queen Sheba, Zinga, and Chaka) and African-American sisters.

Similar in concept to the freedom schools of the Civil Rights era, Blacks, led by Black women, must help the African-American community become a healthier place for women, and by their service in assisting to reorganize Penn Street, the school community, likewise. Since many churchwomen and the National League of Negro Women are already involved in such teaching, the

work could spread powerfully from the advocacy of educational and other leaders.

About the ability of mothers to make a difference in the lives of their daughters and the community—and the rippling effects their work can have, Noble (1978) said:

. . . Activist mothers, those engaged in causes related to a better life for minorities . . . seemed to develop among their offspring an unusual capacity for nurturant behavior. Concern for others—the oppressed, the needy—was associated with activist motherhood. This certainly gives us hope for Black children whose mothers are actively involved in community change, often the case with mother-oriented families. (p. 106)

At Penn Street, Dawn's mother and the Chapter One mothers and fathers represent an in-place activist-advocacy group that could grow because of Mrs. Smith's position as a concerned minister's wife and because of the participation of the president of the Coalition of Neighborhood Organizations as a parent. By endeavoring in partnership with a new-concept school, these people could make a positive difference to girls' lives in the school and in the neighborhood.

Penn Street and other schools in the community must become community education centers, therefore, physical and conceptual meeting-places for teaching and learning of all kinds, day and evening, for students and their parents. In the absence of jobs, community people could learn grant-writing, self-help enterprises, tutoring, and so on, to be useful and to keep hopes up and to contribute to a better future for their socially embattled boys and girls. These educational outlets, along with service agencies, medical, and some hobby/practical-arts assistance (sewing, carpentry, knitting, and so on), could be the

beginning of a nouveau-settlement-house concept of schooling. They would represent a broader view of the function of school and a different idea of educational "privilege." Both of these would be beneficial to girls who currently are profoundly separated from community in the course of their schooling and who are educated under a limited rather than inclusive paradigm of schooling and "school community."

That such goals are reasonable and consistent with the thinking of some others in the state on changed, meaningful educational reform is supported by the work of ex-State Representative Teola Hunter in the 1980s. Considering the idea of sociopolitical coalitions, she surveyed the state of Michigan and talked to many groups about delivery of collaborative services to children (similar to the Chapel Hill model in North Carolina). Although her main focus was not education, many people in the field of education expressed interest in having education become a part of any such collaborative effort. As recently as 1991, several of these groups, led by women, were still attempting to network with other agents of change in communities in the state. After funding, services and curricula were the paramount concerns. In the case of Penn Street, curriculum is also a crucial consideration.

Curriculum

An appropriate curriculum for education that will be artistry-enhancing for girls and intellectually sound and inwardly healthy for all students is one

emphasizing creativity, independence, African and African-American history, and community service and career.

Creativity. Subject-integrated arts, separate arts, and practical arts should be a main focus in the re-formed school. Daily creativity is inwardly healing for females who live under domination and oppression and is pleasing for most girls because it allows self-expression, decision making, and meaningful enterprise. Arts provide ways of problem solving that matter to a finished product, higher-order thinking, and connection with the world of artists, doers, and thinkers. Expressive arts such as dancing, singing, drama, sculpture, and painting should be choices, as well as some practical arts such as sewing, carpentry, macrame, needlepoint, and so on.

Psychological trauma of girls who are perennially "at the bottom" of society's and schools' considerations does not disappear because it is not addressed. It becomes more deeply buried, to emerge, perniciously, in adulthood. Garbarino and others (1992), who performed therapy and research with children from war-torn areas (overseas and in United States urban areas) said this of the necessity of self-expression in victimized or traumatized children:

It is the permissiveness to be themselves, the understanding, the acceptance, the recognition of feelings, the clarification of what they think and feel that helps children retain their self-respect; and the possibilities of growth and change are forthcoming as they all develop insight. (cited from Axline, 1964, p. 202)

Furthermore, they attributed to art (a form of play at any age) these benefits:

1. Physical, social, logico-mathematical knowledge.
2. Symbolic understanding.
3. Experimentation leading to an improved store of questions and answers.
4. Improved behavior.
5. Insight into the student's reality. (pp. 205-222)

Because revamped thinking requires that the arts be taught as arts and not as normative, cognitive "subjects," girls can realize a degree of freedom or independence in them as they may not be able to in any other part of their day, although independence is another tenet of the new curriculum.

Independence. This area of the curriculum represents the main academic area of the girls' educational program. It teaches them the "culture of power" in order that they may understand it and be able to maneuver within it or use it in order to further their goals of personal and social independence. The independence curriculum consists of the following:

1. Culture-of-power oral and written English, math, science, history, geography, and economics. These will be taught in both subject-integrated and single-subject form, where necessary, to give students the overview, scope, and skills necessary for useful knowledge attainment (in concepts and skills). U.S. and world history (revisionist) will be taught. Economics will be taught as a separate, concentrated subject (girls are interested in economics. I have never known an African-American girl who did not want to know how Madame C. J.

Walker made a million dollars with beauty products. They are also interested in how Oprah makes and keeps her fortune.)

2. Current affairs and connections to their lives and community. Familiarity is necessary here with functions, organization, and propaganda of the media. Also, the INTELLIGENT UNDERSTANDING OF TV, COMMERCIALS, ADS, PERSUASION.

3. Broader-based learning outside the school proper: prepared-for trips to libraries, museums, theaters, businesses, restaurants. Reading, writing, and pen-pals in connection with school learning.

4. Research and community problems: gaining familiarity with community problems through oral reports, interviews, oral histories, newspapers, records, books. This area would also involve becoming familiar with local governments and writing letters to government officials and opinion columns. Also, attending city council meetings and school administration meetings (on which elected students will serve), and interviewing leaders when possible.

5. Early acquaintance with higher education through trips, speakers, support groups and business-supported scholarships for summer visits, conferences, workshops, camps for students. Efforts to have students become goal- and career-oriented.

African and African-American history. One of the most painful, haunting, and indelible occurrences an African-American teacher ever encounters is beautiful Black kids in her or his classroom hotly denying that they are Black, that

they are, in fact, "Indian." African-American children laughing along with Whites about Hollywood images of African "natives" (like the current one by Taco Bell). And Black children so ashamed of slavery that they miss the triumph of the "Roots" story, saying, self-blamingly, "We really let them make fools of us" (emphasis mine).

All the efforts in the world to build self-esteem CANNOT be successful when children are ashamed of their heritage and even a multi-millionaire like their hero, Michael Jackson, is ashamed of his Negroid nose and replaces it with a narrower one. In learning to understand the reality of Africa, the diaspora, and slavery in the western hemisphere, students may learn to understand Michael's inferiority complex despite his wealth and talents. Gorgeous Black girls at Penn Street will no longer feel handicapped by their kind of beauty, but revel in it.

In this aspect of the curriculum,¹ the "Tarzan" lies need to be confronted, their misconceptions about "Sarafina!" examined, and the mental and other myths about Blacks patiently and solidly exposed in the classroom, at last. This can best be begun by having African and other Black speakers from around the world who are studying at nearby universities come and talk to the children, bring pictures of their countries, and describe their childhood. Films produced by Black African filmmakers must be shown, and African stories and poetry can be read.

¹This component of the curriculum can be taught within the school by guest instructors from the community colleges or in the community by knowledgeable, responsible lay teachers in churches, businesses, libraries, and/or other schools. It will be a weekly ALL YEAR aspect of the curriculum, with planned, sequential lessons.

Videos of African entertainers (traditional and contemporary) must be viewed, and feelings of inferiority about Africa should be addressed by counselors and other therapists.

Pride in accomplishments made under the most cruel, inhuman form of slavery and subsequent oppression known to this world will be fostered, and Kwanza and some African festivals will be held. A landless people can thus celebrate community and survivorship through the learning of language, customs, and history. A new pride stemming from new knowledge of African and African-American women will provide inner-oppressed girls vital "nourishment to grow on," as will thinking of broader career horizons in service to their own people and community, as discussed next.

Community service and career. This is another area in which the community will share teaching of students with professional teachers. Students will learn the structure of their community through census figures and demographics, maps, histories, occupations, and people. They will learn the history of the community and school and survey their needs. They will read to the old, help the elderly and infirm fill out forms and make telephone calls, assist at nursery schools, and participate in a Junior-Pals and Grandpals (grandparents as pals) program. They will learn how to assist the disabled, be of service at local hospitals, tutor elementary school students, and learn what it takes to be a community leader.

Each student will serve in a rotating apprenticeship program, and girls will be placed with successful women in the community. Through the voluntary participation of businesses, institutions, and service agencies, students will learn the functions of various persons and work that keep their community going. The apprenticeships will be prepared for by reading and followed by a research project based on questions and insights students gained at one of their apprenticeship locations. Teachers and community aides at Penn Street will scout, contact, and prepare community people for the program, supplement supervision of students, and make certain that a viable learning experience is enjoyed, insofar as possible, by student and apprentice trainer.

Girls, in particular, will be encouraged to think of career options from among the ones experienced in the apprenticeship program and will be guided to research information about educational training, cost and financial assistance possible, personal characteristics needed, demand, salary, and so on. A personal interview with a person employed in the desired career or work will be arranged, if possible.

All written material, tapes, videos, lists of contact people, and other information pertinent to the running of a successful community-service and career program will be organized suitably for retrieval and improvement with each succeeding group of students by professional and lay staff at Penn Street. The culminating event for all students and parents will be an end-of-year career fair with invited speakers from many occupations outside the community in order

to increase the students' awareness of the world of work. As in other phases of the new-school curriculum, options for girls will be stressed, and an effort will continuously be made by a parent-teacher committee to support or sponsor students for scholarships for higher education or specialized training after high school. New-school organization, thinking, and a redefined sense of mission will enable this work to occur as a rightful duty of professional teachers in the Penn Street program.

Structure of schooling. Organization of the new-concept school (new-school) is based on breaking up the large "audiences" of students for whom teachers have had to perform, ordinarily in the past, into more teachable, smaller groupings of students that will allow for the attention, voice, and participation that Penn Street girls need. This will be achieved by having two teachers and one aide responsible for a cohort of 30 students, only 10 of whom meet together at a time. One "family" of 10 will meet at school with its mentor-teacher or other teachers in independence instruction while another "family" of 10 is supervised at African history class by the other mentor-teacher and the other "family" of 10 is accompanied at apprenticeship by the mentor-aide. The groups then rotate and each group has all experiences.

The general plan is that total time in a school year is divided into fifths, with three-fifths of the available time allocated to independence studies, one-fifth to creativity, and another fifth to community-service/career pursuits. In each week, a "family" will spend three full days at school, another day in

apprenticeship, and the final one in a combination of African studies (history), single-subject studies, and computer competency. Expressive arts will be engaged in four days per week in the morning immediately after the cohort opening exercise, which is designed to achieve a feeling of togetherness and security. This opening exercise will be inspirational, affective, and designed by students. Once a week, the opening exercise will be extended into a "town meeting" forum for opinion-airing and a platform for visiting speakers.

The absolutely inflexible portion of the school day is the final two hours every day in which all students at Penn do homework in groups of 30 throughout the building. At least one teacher, one aide, and one parent will assist with homework.

The school year is ten months long, meets from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, and includes Saturday mentor-mentee meetings and activities (these are community mentors, not teacher mentors) and extracurricular sports and recreation. Also, each group of 30 will hold a monthly family-student-teacher supper that will include an overview of what students are learning (and some demonstrations), as well as singing, dancing, and/or drama games.

This educational program is designed to include the affectives that girls require to learn well and remain in school and the participation of parents and community members. It is also designed to eliminate the need for special education labeling and isolation, mostly, because the school-families are small enough that each student should be able to receive necessary attention and

learn well. It will be possible to have a collaborative team of three adults per 30 students because ordinary nonacademic courses such as shop and home economics will not be taught in this plan, and the coalition budget will make it possible to hire adequately. Instead, those teachers can contribute their talents to the practical arts and fine arts in the creative component in the mornings and afterwards join in planning and lessons for the group of 30. The aide on the team will function as an other-mother from the community, making sure that students receive attention and recognition for good report cards, exemplary behavior, regular attendance, and student improvement, and ensuring that birthdays are not passed over. She will advise teachers on ways to make instruction more palatable to students and be present when necessary at parent-teacher meetings in order to facilitate conversations.

Teachers who are not professionally prepared to work in the new-school format can be inserviced or sent to training workshops the prior summer. It is particularly important that they become comfortable and skilled in conversational, experiential, democratic teaching. Also in broader-based community relations and community-inclusive instruction. Obviously, they must receive long-term support for this change process. This is particularly the case in their learning to use artistic/dramatized teaching methods. The concept is so far removed from the knowledge and experience of most American classroom teachers that they will be unsure of themselves for some time. However, when teachers in other cities (such as Guggenheim Elementary School in Chicago, existing right next

door to a large ghetto housing project) have tried more artistic methods, they have been wonderfully surprised with the change in African-American youngsters. Meetings can be arranged with some of these teachers and with successful teachers from, say, Benton Harbor.

Funds for retraining, increased transportation expenses, and enlarged community staff will come from the coalition budget, just as administration of the school comes basically from the coalition plus teacher and student representatives.¹ This is site-based management in collaborative language and should be limited to 12 people who will make humane policy by consensus. Agencies will designate their representatives in the manner they choose, and teacher and student representatives will be elected by the school (two teachers by the faculty and two students by the student body).

The social and medical facilities located on the Penn Street campus will establish a communication and referral system with the school and also a reporting mechanism. The medical personnel will include psychological counselors who can supplement the work of the tremendously overburdened counselors at Penn Street. Together, they will train and advise staff on fruitful ways of interacting with diverse groups and individuals under the new concept of teaching at the middle school.

¹The school principal also serves on this board. Principal and teachers are hired by board members and serve at their pleasure.

In all aspects of the new-school curriculum and organization, priority will be given to facilitating:

1. A holistic approach to teaching students at Penn Street.
2. Participation by and choice-making of girls; realization of high standards by the girls.
3. Better male-female relations between students.
4. Narrative reporting by teachers to parents and agencies.
5. Meaningful participation and employment by parents and community members in the school.
6. Respect for African-American culture.
7. Preparation of students for participation in mainstream culture--if they should eventually want to participate.¹
8. High internalized standards in students for self-respect, responsibility, and growth (intellectual, emotional, spiritual).

The Saturday program at the school and mentor and recreational activities will be created and supervised by parents and the Coalition of Neighborhood Organizations. When funds make it possible, they also (with key persons holding salaried positions) will form an evening school for self-improvement and skill acquisition for adults. They would arrange teachers, transportation, and security. Many of my girls in drama have asked me to teach them how to sew or find them

¹Some people deliberately choose an occupation that can be performed within the Black community, such as barbering, hairdressing, sewing, caring for children or old people, and so on.

someone else who can. They admire hand-worked bags, hats, belts, and so on, and some mothers and other-mothers may enjoy teaching these practical arts to others or learning them themselves. In addition, the evening (or Saturday) school could sponsor the grant-writing courses that would make it possible for parents and the school to offer scholarships and some educational experiences outside the city to Penn Street students.

Mainly, school goals, curriculum, and organization must represent a more cooperative, humanized, student-sensitive effort among school, parents, community, and service-providing organizations and agencies if adolescent girls and the other students are to learn better, become unalienated, and choose to make opportunities where there seem to be none and not give in to hopelessness, despair, destruction, and counter-hatred. Similarly, teaching, too, must become a less teacher-centered undertaking and a more student-involved one "if teachers are to survive and students are to thrive."

Teaching and teacher education.¹ Garbarino and others (1992, p. 202) supported my last comment in the previous section by asserting that the restoration of hurt children to wholeness begins in the strength of relationships between those children and the adults in their sphere of being. Girls at Pennsylvania Street Middle School can be nurtured back into high self-esteem if the adults in their world care enough about them. After parents and family,

¹To include service-related scholarships and training for middle-aged neighborhood people who are willing to become teachers.

teachers are chief among these significant adults. What is required is that these teachers be real human beings. They must be people who welcome in themselves wholeness and searching. People who do not "have all the answers" but who have many questions about this world and honor the questions of students as legitimate, proper, and growth-producing when handled with sensitivity and empathy.

In addition to excellent, broad professional preparation, empathy is a crucial trait for teachers who work with girls at Penn Street. These professionals, female and male, Black and White, must be able to reach back to the child they used to be. They must remember hurts and times they were treated utterly unfairly, passed over, disregarded. They must be able to remember earning a grade they didn't receive or being eliminated from consideration in something important without having been given a chance. Being looked through and made nonexistent. These are the parts of their autobiographies that will help them to understand their students, to identify with them soul to soul.

I am not talking here of cloying sympathy, of missionaryism that divests students of their rights and inclinations as thinking human beings. Teachers who come to the ghetto to do "missionary work" can never be effective because they proceed from the wrong presumptions, namely, that their students cannot think as well as others and that they, the teachers, know more about what's good for them than they and their families do. It is a superior attitude masked by false humility, and such teachers make "pets" of Black students without teaching them.

And teachers who are basically fearful of being in an all-African-American environment cannot teach the girls to be assertive and unafraid. As Dorothy Young, the African-American principal of Hillside Middle School in Kalamazoo once said to my students at Western Michigan University, "I can't use people who are afraid of Black children. I want teachers who know that kids are kids."

In addition to the pedagogical traits mentioned in the previous section (conversational style, interactional, high expectations, democratic, artistic), and the personality characteristics mentioned in this one, teachers must be prepared to be what drama director-educator Bob Alexander (1983) described below:

. . . People who can take risks and dare to do new things—and not judge themselves harshly. What is important is the ability to use your imagination, which means to do things you've never done before. You must be able to rise above the cliques and cooperate with your coworkers. The amount of energy and enthusiasm that you come in with each week is extremely important. If you are going to create an environment . . . that will help someone get in touch with who they are on a very deep level, so that they feel that they can succeed, experiment, explore, discover and come up with their own answers, then you, as adults, have to be in tune with your own processes of creativity. (pp. 10, 11)

The most important thing is to create an environment where there's an absence of fear about learning something new. Your own learning process has to continue. Once there were no such things as classroom teachers; people learned by doing. Now we have people who spend most of their lives being teachers. Usually, what teachers do is stop doing their lives. Their lives become teaching other people. You can't teach well unless you're learning yourself. (p. 13)

A way to get in touch with the process of creativity is to actively pursue the learning of one of the arts (or several) and incorporate it into classroom teaching. As far as helping oppressed girls overcome fear and learn to step out of their imposed limitations, Penn Street teachers must meet and mingle with other

Blacks in the community who have done this. Teachers need to meet poor African-Americans socially and hear some of their stories and learn what they have overcome. For that matter, faculty members at Penn Street need to cross the racial divide that separates them from each other and hear each other's stories. Numerous of the Black teachers "came up the hard way" in Mississippi and other parts of the South, and there are White faculty who have had it far from easy. Their lives represent the language of possibility for their students, but they do not seem to know this or incorporate the strength of their own experiences--the basis of their own artistry--into their teaching enough.

Teachers need to meet parents again. On parents' own turf. As far as I could tell, the AEP (Alternative Educational Program) teacher is the only one at Penn Street who makes any home visits. Teachers and parents could meet each other in more natural, relaxed circumstances then. Teachers could hear some of the parents' stories and learn from them because the stories reveal parents' attitudes about the important things in their lives. Teachers could (and MUST) learn that parents stand much taller than they'd ever suspect. How many teachers know that one of the fathers was a confidant of the late Malcolm X? That several have traveled extensively throughout the world in the military service? That two seventh-grade fathers were Golden Gloves contenders? That many mothers work all day and attend college at night? That one mother has nearly completed the qualifications to become a teacher? Particularly for teachers who do not know any low-income African-American people intimately,

such experiences are vital. Otherwise, teachers who teach their children think of parents and children in terms of those damaging deficit statistics that characterize Blacks in the eyes of most Americans.

A way to begin preparing Penn Street teachers for the process of change that is necessary is to stock the sparse teachers' professional library in the school with works on newer approaches to teaching and hold weekly reading-discussion circles around them in which their fears and reservations can be expressed, but also the knowledge gained that, in other places, teachers just like them are becoming more successful with urban African-American students. Following these preparatory discussions, workshops that demonstrate and then allow teachers to practice newer methods need to be held at frequent, regular intervals. African-American speakers from the community and people who are able to teach mini-courses on Black history and culture should follow those workshops.

The practice of holding forums in which small groups of students (10 to 12) and teachers talk regularly with each other about "how things are going" should be introduced. Girls must be listened to with respect in these and given unrushed opportunities to have their say. The practice of writing narrative quarterly reports on students will cause teachers to look more closely at students and provide teachers with substantial information to discuss with parents at home or school conferences, in line with Holt's (1967) suggestion that teachers look at students closely and learn who they are:

My aim . . . is . . . to persuade [educators] to LOOK at children, patiently, repeatedly, respectfully, and to hold off making theories and judgments about them until they have in their minds what most of them do not now have--a reasonably accurate model of what children are like. (p. 144)

Teacher education. I have already spoken about what inservice education should be like in order for teachers to begin teaching more successfully "Niara's sisters" and others. I will now address myself to preservice teacher education. I believe that the first aim of sound teacher education should be to enable teachers, as Holt suggested, to "see" children as they are and not as they are captured on the pages of a textbook or in the mind of a professor who has not taught active youngsters for many years (if ever). After a variety of seeing experiences, the teacher candidate (who has been admitted to the college on the basis of an above-average grade point average and satisfactory entry interview) then will decide whether she/he wishes to further pursue teaching as a career.

The way this can be done is by having education undergraduates assist in week-end and summer camp experiences to which urban and other children come. The preservice teacher, as a camp counselor, plans for, meets, and interacts with kids in a "natural" state--in game playing, in swimming, in singing, in storytelling, and so on. This camp will be instituted and run by the college for the purpose of having students and professors interact with kids and revise attitudes, misconceptions, and theories. At the same time undergrads are having a variety of camp-related experiences, they will be taking coursework that will provide them a broad view of humanity if they decide on teaching preparation

and will be transferable as a liberal arts/general education block if they decide to leave the program. These courses are:

Philosophy (world and western)

Anthropology and diversity

World history

Western history

Modern feminism

General psychology

General sociology

Theories of play in development

Fine arts elective

Students who go on in the program will take, among others, the following courses:

African-American history; Native American; Mexican

History of women in the world and diverse learners (two courses)

Urban and rural environments

Crises in modern society

A concept of capitalism

Fine arts sequence

Readings of minority writers

Stories of teachers and learners

Theories of learning and educational philosophers and practitioners¹

Designs in action research (in the classroom)

Arts and crafts

Urban communities and education policies and practices

Camp planning and camp participation should last about one and one-half years, followed by small-group and individual-student tutoring experience in schools. Third-year experience in schools should be collaborative or team-teaching with two or three experienced teachers, and the fourth year should be supervised student teaching. A master's degree in teaching should not be awarded before the novice teacher has experienced one year's probationary teaching (in which creative planning and projects can be demonstrated and rapport and democratic leadership with students evidenced) and two years of satisfactory professional teaching.

From the third year of preparation onward, preservice teachers should have many experiences conversing with parents, planning educational-social experiences with them, and intermingling with them at school and in their homes. Numerous whole-family gatherings should be experienced, such as family fun-nights at school, fairs, bowling parties, birthday parties, Kwanza, and so on. Teachers in preparation and probationary teachers must learn, by sheer force of personality, to overcome the silences and mistrust of adolescent African-

¹Dewey, Tolstoy, Montessori, A. S. Neill, Myles Horton, Freire, Marva Collins, Wiggington.

American girls whose life experiences have taught them to be suspicious and feel inferior to others. In this effort, the advice of certain experienced teachers and winning the respect of family and community may prove beneficial. What will not be beneficial are lists I have seen of comparative traits of Blacks and Whites and "others," demeaning lists that suggest that should one know the list, one knows "what they're like."

Nothing can beat experience, observation, listening, and talking in learning to teach Ivy and Jimmi and Deirdre, and Queenie and all the rest. These things are really the basis of the "emancipatory" or "liberatory" education talked about by Giroux and others. Nothing a professor in a university can devise can free people whom he/she does not know. Even if he/she does know them, it is arrogant to believe that they do not have ideas on freeing themselves. Outsiders did not start and control the Civil Rights movement. Blacks did. They "stretched out" on their faith and hope—in themselves and in America—and sang and marched. Then, as now, they knew what they wanted.

Despair has set in in many Black communities now, the result of increasing social unfairness, poor health, community violence, drug addiction, and the loss of so many kinds of faith. The hopelessness must somehow be overcome. That is the most basic level of conscientization or awareness that would lead to eventual liberation. Hopelessness, inertia, and self-hatred are about inner oppression, and it is these that teaching must seek to alleviate in African-American students at the same time that African-American girls:

1. Are being increasingly harmed and sexually abused by older males in their neighborhoods afraid of AIDS in older women.
2. Are becoming teen mothers at alarming rates.
3. Are committing suicide at an accelerating rate.
4. Are consigned to the bottom of the social heap by a social order that cares little for African-Americans in general and ignores the needs of Black females and their children alarmingly.

Teachers must care that Bette's life is being devastated, that Jimmi's gifts may well become lost to her people and her country, that Brenda has attended nine years of school without learning anything except how to hate. We cannot solve many of the problems we witness, but we can try, and we can help strengthen the artistry in the kids so they can hang on. Many of them will succeed in life despite the desperately difficult uphill climb, and we can have a part in that success. We can say to students like the girls at Pennsylvania Street Middle School that we suffer for Black boys who are being lost, but that we care about girls who are being shortchanged, too. We can say:

Come,
 Let us reason, reflect and converse together.
 That way, we can both learn something worthwhile
 Because listening, rather than performing
 For each other
 Is how we touch each other and grow close enough
 To begin to grow unafraid of what we have heard
 About each other.

Teachers have a choice to make, just as Niara did. But ours will help put this nation on a right track or one day rock it to its foundations. It's all about artistry and each other.

NIARA'S DILEMMA

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Niara is a 16-year-old African-American student. She is in her second year of high school and wants to drop out of school and be on her own. She longs to leave home and be her own boss. She knows dropping out is a pretty big step, but it is on her mind all the time. Her parents have warned her to stay in school or move out.

She loves her family and all, but they get on her nerves and don't seem to understand her, at all. She has to do housework, babysit her numerous nieces and nephews, and endure complaints about her friends until she could scream. All she sees her brother doing is putting his feet under the table and throwing dirty clothes in the hamper—for her to wash! Niara feels she is too old to take this, and people who meet her think she is much older than 16.

Her best friend, Debra, thinks she is crazy and urges her to stick it out at school and at home. But Niara isn't convinced: she feels school is just as bad as her home. They are both wasting her time, having her do juvenile things and follow too many stupid rules. After all, Debra's sister left home last year and seems to be doing fine. She has a job and a new car that Niara sees her cruising around the 'hood in. Being young, Black and female hasn't held her back any.

Niara's boyfriend, Jawan, thinks she should do whatever she wants and says he'll be in her corner, either way. He knows a place she can stay and a job

she can get if she does decide to "try to fly." Mainly he says, "My name is Wes; leave me out of this mess!"

Niara spends a lot of time daydreaming when she's by herself. She dreams about being a big success, and she knows only she can make it happen. She's heard so many people say that school didn't help them get where they are. That they just had to go on out there and make it happen for themselves. That's what she wants to do, but sometimes, she has to admit, having the sole responsibility for her own life is a bit scary. She doesn't want everyone she knows and loves mad at her. She's been around her family all her life and doesn't want to lose them; it's just that they are always holding her back from things she really wants. She doesn't want to hurt her parents, either, but going to college because they didn't go doesn't make sense to her. In two years she could have a high school diploma if she stuck it out, and she'd like that, but, Lord, two more years would kill her!

She would discuss all this with Mrs. Varnette, her favorite teacher, but lately, Mrs. V has been so busy that Niara doesn't like to bother her. Mrs. V is real smart and always gives Niara good advice, except about Jawan. Mrs. V thinks she sees too much of her boyfriend, but even Mrs. V doesn't know everything! Besides, whenever she hangs around outside Mrs. V's office, Miss Brady the Nasty spies her. Comes asking if she can be of help and tries to get in her business. She didn't help when she was Niara's no-teaching English

teacher, so she can just get out of her face, now. Always trying to tell her she's doing something else wrong.

It's late and Niara is feeling sleepy. Time to hit the sheets, because it has been a long, worrisome day. Maybe she'll spend a minute or two asking God (or whoever is supposed to be up there) what she should do. She's been saying her little prayer for a while now, and it doesn't seem like she's getting any answers. People are always saying, "Try the Lord," and "The Lord answers prayer," but her prayers aren't being answered. Why not? Maybe the Lord doesn't care about these problems of a girl like her. Maybe she'll just have to find her own answers.

The last thought on her mind before she drifts off to sleep is a hope that in the morning, she'll be able to make the right decision for her.

Questions

1. In your own words, what is the story about?
2. What kind of girl is Niara? Tell me what you think she's like.
3. If you were in Niara's shoes, what would you do? Why?
4. From which person is Niara likely to get the best advice? The worst advice?
5. What should her family do to help her? Debra? Jawan? Mrs. Varnette?
6. Should she leave school to follow her dreams? Can school help her with her dreams? Why or why not?
7. What do you imagine Niara's dream is?
8. Do you think staying in school or leaving early is better for African-American girls? Why?
9. What is Niara's attitude toward God? How can God help her? Do you think God will?
10. PLEASE LISTEN WHILE I READ YOU A LATER PART OF THE STORY:

It is a year from now. Niara has made her decision to either stay at home and in school or to drop out and leave because she must go to school if she stays at home. IN YOUR OWN WORDS, TELL WHAT YOU SEE HER DOING NOW. DESCRIBE WHAT HER LIFE IS LIKE NOW. THERE IS NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWER! JUST LET YOUR IMAGINATION LEAD YOU.

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