

From the Heart  
About Schools, Education, Teachers, Students, Parents, Society

I realize that as I have been writing my story, school played a big part. I entered school when I was 6 (in 1934), and left in 1954, 20 years later. Those were very formative years, and as I looked back, I realized how lucky I was. The country was in a depression in those early years, and we had wonderful teachers.

There is a connection. Jobs were scarce and the best and the brightest chose teaching in the public schools because it was a secure job that paid a decent salary. When good times returned, the best and the brightest had many other choices that were equally secure and paid a lot more.

The economic state of the country also impacted the attitude of the students and their families. You would have a better chance at a good job if you had an education. Stay in school, because there is no job waiting for you if you quit. Not only was the classroom a pretty good place to spend the day, you also received free lunch. And when we graduated from high school, we went on to a no tuition college.

Which takes me to 1949, when I graduated from CCNY. I was then able to enter the CCNY Master's program in Education at no tuition, and while I was working for the ILGWU, I attended NYU in the evening, for which I did have to pay tuition. That is a lot of education.

For a few weeks in 1950, I worked as a substitute teacher in the NYC school system, the same school system that gave me a wonderful education, a few years before. But times had changed. When I was in elementary school, everybody was poor. Now, times were good, but there were pockets of poverty in largely Black and Hispanic neighborhoods. In the South, there was "de jure" school segregation. In the North, there was "de facto" segregation. In 1950, as a substitute teacher, I was perplexed by the fact that the most competent teachers were in the predominantly white schools in the more affluent neighborhoods, and the least competent were in the predominantly minority schools in the least affluent (poorer) neighborhoods.

And the quality of the teaching began to change. There were still committed teachers, especially in the elementary schools, but opportunities for those interested in science and math opened up in companies that paid a great deal more than teachers were getting. Only those few who loved the idea of teaching remained, and those who couldn't get those high paying jobs. Aside: In the School of Education, we used to say, "Those who can, do, and those who can't, teach; and those who can't teach, teach teachers."

More of a problem. Minority student attitudes. We have been on a roller-coaster of blame. In the south it was starkly clear: that black kids were outrageously deprived. Inadequate schools, supplies, teachers, administrators. Money for their education was a fraction of the money for white children. Certainly not separate but equal. In the north, it was subtler, but again, minority kids got less. The solution: school desegregation. The Supreme Court decision. There was resistance, south and north.

Many black kids began to insist that doing well in school was a "white thing." Many

black parents did not place the same emphasis on doing well as white parents. And for many black kids, their parents were unable to serve as role models, having been deprived of an education, or having been educated in inferior schools.

It is 2012. We have a new generation of children, in a new generation of technology. Minority kids are not doing as well as white and Asian kids. The finger-pointing is going strong. The old charges: inadequate funds for education. No parent involvement. Poor home environment. Minority students just aren't bright. They have no interest in learning. No aspirations. No self-motivation. Poor teachers. Unions oppose change which would make for innovative teaching. No competition. Money which should go to the students, go to the teachers—salaries, pensions, health benefits. Administrators can't get rid of poor teachers.