

MY YEAR AS A TEACHER

Homework for the Teacher Visiting kids' families in a search for understanding

Series: MY YEAR AS A TEACHER. **Chapter 6.** The Homes

By Emily Sachar. Newsday [Long Island, N.Y] 03 Dec 1989: 06.

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I HAD PHONED their parents. I had scoured their records. And I had read their essays. But in my year as an eighth-grade math teacher at Walt Whitman Intermediate School, there was one line I did not cross with my students: I did not go to their homes.

I often thought I should; a truly dedicated teacher would not draw a line between school and home. My students' school records only showed grades and test scores from previous years; I wanted to know so much more.

But I was too tired at the end of the school day, and I worried about intruding in a home when I was not invited. I also was having enough trouble doing the things a teacher is supposed to do - like teach.

Instead, I had tried in other ways to welcome parents. For the first pair of open houses in November, I bought chocolates, drew up a sign-in list, and had puzzles on hand, like those I was using in my math classes. But parents of only one-third of my 151 students showed up, even though they had to come to retrieve their children's first-quarter report cards.

I also encouraged parents to attend PTA meetings. The Whitman PTA had 19 members, and no more than 30 people showed up for the routine meetings. Whitman had more than 1,700 students.

And, I often offered to cut short my lunch hour or to surrender my coveted preparation periods to meet with parents whose children were having a hard time in school. But, while some parents showed for scheduled appointments at the Flatbush, Brooklyn, school, most did not. Two months into the school year, I sent letters to the parents of 19 students whom I intended to fail for the first marking period. I heard from only one.

After I had decided to leave teaching, and after the school year had ended, I no longer felt self-conscious about looking into the home lives of my students.

I missed some of my kids and wanted to try to get in touch. I continued to be haunted by others, the ones who had badly misbehaved or whom I had never reached. When school began this year, I visited the homes of five of my former students. I was stunned by what I saw. Some of my students and their parents were more alone than I'd ever imagined. I had never suspected such despair, such boredom, such lack of interest.

As I visited them, I began wondering whether, had I known more about my students' lives, I would have done things differently as their teacher - called in a social worker, arranged private talk time, tempered my shrill voice or referred the families to city agencies. JIMMY, THE student who had disrupted class 8-7 time and time again last year, hugged me tightly when I arrived at his home late one Monday

afternoon.

During that visit, I learned that Jimmy struggles with loneliness. His mother works a demanding job with very long hours, serving food on Amtrak Metroliners. She is often gone from home 17 hours at a time. Jimmy is an only child who often comes home to an empty apartment and no baby-sitter. He moved with his mother from London seven years ago, and his father still lives there. He is not in close contact with his dad.

First, Jimmy and I talked while his mother sat silently in a chair, her head bowed.

"Do you remember acting up in my room last year, Jimmy?" I asked after we chatted a while.

"So, he did it to you, too?" his mother said. I figured she must have forgotten our many phone conversations about her son's behavior the year before. "You know, he does it to all the teachers. He has no respect for education, does he? He has no respect for me." She began to cry.

"I do respect you, Momma. And why do you always have to cry? It's stupid to cry. It doesn't help no one."

"It makes me feel better to cry." The room was quiet for a long while. Then, Jimmy's mother spoke again. "What do you want from me, child?"

"All I want, Momma, is to prove myself to you. I just want you to love me." Jimmy, 14, sat slumped on a couch in the living room of the one-bedroom apartment. "I'm not a bad kid. I study now and then. You don't see me selling drugs on Tilden corner, do you? I'm nice enough in other people's eyes."

"But you're not nice enough in the eyes of me," his mother said, weeping. "How many times have I asked you to respect your teachers? How many times have I asked you to respect me?"

Jimmy's mother, Catherine, threw up her hands and went to the kitchen to make Jimmy his dinner. She had just come back from visiting a dean and two of Jimmy's teachers at the Brooklyn high school Jimmy attends this year. She handed me Jimmy's progress reports. "The worst ever," one teacher had written after a recent math class. "Late again and loud!" another teacher stated.

I had spoken with Jimmy's mother five times last year about her son's poor behavior in my class. Sometimes, it had paid off for a few days. Jimmy would come in to class the next day and say: "I'm going to be good for you, Mrs. Sachar. Just you watch." And I'd thank him. He'd sit quietly for a day, and then we were back at war again - with Jimmy refusing to take his seat, coming late to class, talking out of turn and making nasty remarks about my teaching. The thing that upset me most was that I knew Jimmy was bright enough; he had scored above average on the citywide reading test. But other teachers had said he was struggling and misbehaving in their classes, too.

"Jimmy, what did you want me to do when you acted up in my class?" I asked.

"Beg," he said flatly. "I want the teacher to say: 'Come on, Jimmy. Please. Won't you please sit down today? Won't you please take this test?' Like, without me there, the class is nothing."

I had always suspected Jimmy was craving attention, but I never understood why until his mother told me more about his life.

Like her, Jimmy has sickle-cell anemia and is often exhausted, she said. Several

years ago, he got a severe case of frostbite that was complicated by the disease. And, since June, he's had other complications that require a four-hour blood transfusion every three weeks.

"He screams in pain some nights, and all I can do is hold the child," his mother says.

But Jimmy seemed determined to leave me with the impression that everything was fine. "I'm happy, very happy," he told me.

When I said I didn't believe him, he finally admitted: "Okay, Mrs. Sachar, once in a while, I'm a little lonely."

I wondered what I would have done if I had known about his life on the first day of school last year. If he needed counseling, I didn't have the expertise to provide it. He needed extra help in math, and I had tried to give it to him before school. But he never followed up the tutoring with completed homework, and I became so angry at his laziness that I stopped, midyear, volunteering to tutor him one-on-one.

I tried, for three months, to convince administrators to place Jimmy in a different class so his behavior problems would not disrupt my class. In March, he was finally removed, and I was relieved.

THERE WERE other students who also needed far more help than I was able to provide. Doreen, who was in 8-16 and was one of my slowest students, was one of them. Doreen lives with her mother and five brothers and sisters in a one-bedroom apartment in Flatbush. Harriet, Doreen's mother, left her Guyanese village three years ago, bringing Doreen and her nine other children with her. I was surprised to meet her because I thought Doreen had said she didn't live with her mother. Harriet is still adjusting to her new life. She says she rarely leaves her home, except to go to her job as a cashier on Flatbush Avenue. When her older, married children need her, they come to her fourth-floor apartment. Doreen's father died in 1984 of liver disease.

Doreen, 16, does not know her times tables, and has not learned to read. She has trouble writing her own name, and, when asked to write an essay for me last year, she turned in a sheet of paper with five words on it. The words did not form a sentence. Doreen passed some of her academic subjects, but several of her teachers told me they had passed her merely to encourage her, and because she had tried so hard.

Doreen had to be moved on to high school, the administration said, because she was too old to stay in junior high. She has consistently scored below the eighth percentile on both reading and math tests, and she risks leaving high school without the ability to read and write or do simple math.

Doreen also has medical problems. Her right eye is half-shut and she drags her right leg. Teachers at Whitman speculated that she had had polio, but Harriet says she's not sure and that Doreen has not seen a doctor about it. "When she was three years old, the eye dropped down," Harriet said. "I don't know why."

Harriet says she knows her daughter has trouble in school. "She says to me, 'Momma, I'm trying. But I don't know why, I can't catch it.'"

Since Doreen's mother moved to New York, she has had so little interaction with the education system that she doesn't know what help is available for Doreen, or how to get it. Harriet says she can't remember ever visiting Whitman, where her

daughter was a student for three years.

I referred Doreen for special education in February, and succeeded in getting her evaluated and placed in a 300-student vocational school this year. Doreen originally had been slated to attend Erasmus Hall High School, a school that has a rough reputation and about 3,000 students.

"It's hard here," Harriet says. "But it's better than back home. I couldn't maintain all these kids back there."

ANOTHER STUDENT in Doreen's class, Larry, worried me, too, because his reading skills were weak and because he hung on the periphery of a rough crowd at school last year. But Larry is supervised closely at home by an organized, meticulous mother and a highly motivated older brother, and he is proficient in math.

Larry also is able to express himself clearly in conversation, and he has a variety of outside interests - including music and football - that he works hard to perfect. With a lot of work, Larry will be graduated from high school prepared to get a job.

Larry's father lives in Jamaica, and his mother says she isn't that involved in her son's education. She says, however, that she makes sure Larry's brother, Joseph, 20, checks up on his schoolwork.

"I am involved in their education in that I want them to have one thing to be a master in," Larry's mother, Vivian, said as we spoke in the living room of her apartment, eight blocks from Whitman. "But when it comes to their school, I do not touch it very much. As long as they are satisfied, I am satisfied. The big one pulls it out of the little one."

Larry, who was assigned to the bottom class in the eighth grade solely because of his poor reading, should have been able to take more advanced math. His math skills were stronger than two-thirds of my students, including several who were in the top class. As it was, I had to teach the rest of Larry's classmates the basic math Larry had mastered years ago. I felt guilty about my failure to help Larry beyond giving him special worksheets. Yet, Larry never complained.

"It wasn't the right class for me for math. That's for sure," Larry said. "But it was okay for reading. I'm quiet. I don't like to argue."

"That's how I trained my boys," Vivian, 51, said. "To me, there's one thing I teach them. They go to school to learn. They must have manners to the teacher. Don't come home to me with complaint of the teacher, because the teacher must be right."

Larry, 15, says Joseph asks to see his homework every night, when he returns home from classes at Kingsborough Community College, where he is studying criminal justice. Larry says he relies on his brother's approval. "We have a lot of arguments, but we never have a fight. I love him. I respect him. I'm more scared of him than of her.

"My brother says he wants me to be more and better than he is," Larry adds.

After I left Larry's home, I felt relieved. Although his reading problems are serious, Larry seems to know he needs to work hard, and he wants to do better. He also has the help and encouragement of his family.

WHEN I ARRIVED at Laura's home, two of her sisters were lined up for their mother's signature on homework. With nine children to keep tabs on, Glenda, 40,

says her life is awash in responsibilities. Laura, 14, was one of the top students in my top class, and she excelled in most of her classes last year.

"I always try to tell them their schooling is very important," says Glenda, a home health aide who insists on seeing her kids off to school in the morning and welcoming them home in the afternoon. "Now, Laura, she's a mouth almighty, I always say. You got to keep her mind going. One day, I woke up and Laura there was reading a book, you know, maybe four years old or something. Once she starts running her mouth, you just got to give her more and more work."

But Glenda, who has kids ranging in age from 5 to 19, says there are limits. "My kids got to have fun, too. I'm not saying the teachers should overdo it." Glenda will not discuss Laura's father.

Several years ago, Glenda returned to night school to work on her general equivalency diploma; she had dropped out of high school years ago. "I had cobwebs in my head. But I'm not embarrassed to tell you. I needed my daughter to help me." Laura smiles at the compliment.

At Laura's home, I saw children who have places to study and a mother who makes sure they do. I also saw a parent who cares that her kids speak and act properly. She told me she got furious at Laura one day last year, when she was called to Whitman because Laura had been poking fun at one of her classmates.

"I have no time for that sort of nonsense," Glenda said. "And, if she didn't know it before, Laura sure knows it now."

But most of the time, Laura's mother gets a big smile when she hears stories about her daughter. "I would tell you Laura is a nut," Glenda says. "She's very friendly, very outgoing. She likes people. She's not a troublemaker. Sometimes her mouth gets the better of her. But Laura is a good-hearted person."

Says Laura, "Nothing gets me down. I have many, many, many, many, many, many friends. I don't have any big problems, just little problems, like what to wear to school the next day. I felt lost the first day of high school, but by the second day, I knew my way around. And I'm doing great again this year."

As I was leaving her home, Laura told me to try to find her in 10 years. "You'll see, Mrs. Sachar. I'll do something great," she said.

And I believe Laura will; her mother will make sure of it. Glenda, Brooklyn-born-and-bred, knows what she has a right to expect from the school system, and she makes sure her daughter gets it. She has opinions on everything from the curriculum her kids study to who should be the city's schools chancellor. She knows the names of the principals of the schools her children attend and she knows the names of the members of the local school board. ONE OF MY other students, Roberto, says he, too, wants to do something great. But I don't think he understands what a hard road lies ahead. Roberto, one of the slower students from 8-13, does not know the times tables, and his reading and writing skills are poor. Yet Roberto says he wants to be a doctor.

"Every day, when he leaves here, I go down on my knees and pray to God for Roberto's mind opening up," says his mother, Juanita, 40, who emigrated from the Dominican Republic in 1968. She still struggles with English and asks her three boys to translate most of our interview. The family speaks Spanish at home. "When Roberto started school, Roberto was never learning. He has many problems. I

talked to God about Roberto."

Roberto starts laughing. "It was funny, Mrs. S. Mommy would tell me to get cornflakes and I brought bread. Or she'd tell me to get soap and I'd get shampoo. I couldn't remember anything. If the teacher say something, I didn't know anything they said."

Roberto says he's doing better in school this year. But when I taught Roberto last year and tutored him after school, I found serious learning problems. I couldn't tell whether he had a poor memory or just failed to concentrate. The result was the same: He did not seem to recall work I had taught just hours before. Even one-on-one during our Wednesday afternoon tutoring sessions, he often couldn't remember what I had said five minutes before.

Roberto, 15, admits that one of his biggest problems is a lack of interest in school. "Roberto doesn't study his work," his mother says. Roberto nods. "The schoolwork can be boring," he says.

Roberto doesn't seem to understand what an impediment his lack of attentiveness will be. He has a happy, secure homelife, with relatives constantly dropping by and giving hugs and presents, but he doesn't seem to recognize that all this will change someday and he will be required to support himself.

Roberto shares the two-bedroom apartment with his mother, his father and two younger brothers. The three boys share a bedroom with a cousin who recently arrived from the Dominican Republic.

Until two months ago, the family also was hosting two foster children, who became the centerpiece of the household. "I like having the baby girls around," Roberto's mom says, and the boys nod. A crib where the two girls slept was still in the master bedroom when I visited. Roberto's mom said she hopes to fill it again soon.

Roberto says he is encouraged to be a doctor by his passing mark in science last year; he says he got a 70 for the final marking period. He also passed language arts with a 65, he says, and social studies with an 85. He says he wants to be an obstetrician. "I know I have to study hard, two hours a night probably, and go to college. So I leave it in God's hands."

When I told Roberto he'd have to go to medical school for at least four years after college to become a doctor, he looked surprised. "But, I can do it, Mrs. S," he said. "You'll see. Dr. Roberto in a few years."

I told Roberto he'd have to learn his times tables and understand fractions before the medical textbooks would make any sense. Last year, Roberto scored in the ninth percentile on the citywide math test. He failed my class.

"It's okay, because I did okay in my other classes. All the teachers liked me. They said I was a good boy in my class. I learned a lot from different works."

I left Roberto hoping that the tough realities of life hit him slowly, and that his spirit is not destroyed when they do. I hope that someone will help him find other goals if his dream to be a doctor falls through.

After visiting my students' families, I asked myself again: What could I have done differently had I known how alone and sick Jimmy was; how unfamiliar Doreen's mother was with the American school system; how hard Larry was struggling to overcome his reading handicap; how unrealistic Roberto's dreams were; and how much Laura needs to be challenged? They weren't that different from the many

other students I had taught who needed to be guided and challenged and understood.

But the reality was, they were five of 151 students, and it was demanding enough just to keep tabs on their attendance, homework and test scores. I really couldn't have done much more for them than teach.