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A Teacher's Leaven

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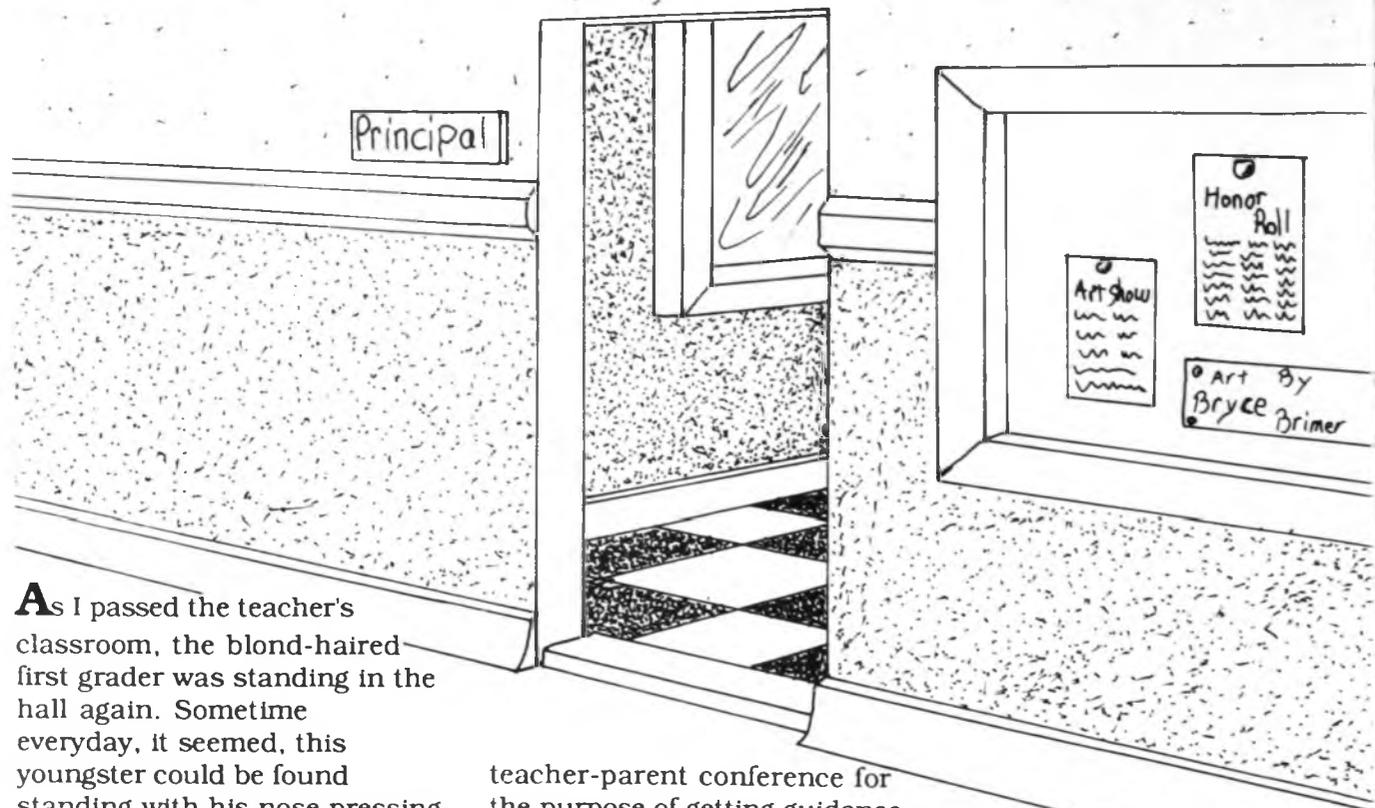
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A TEACHER'S LEAVEN



As I passed the teacher's classroom, the blond-haired first grader was standing in the hall again. Sometime everyday, it seemed, this youngster could be found standing with his nose pressing against a nonexistent spot just outside his classroom; and the school year had just barely begun. I cringed.

Public-school teachers teach children--not just the academically ready child or just the student whose parents can pay, but every child who meets enrollment criteria. That's the beauty of public education for America's children. Teachers are expected to produce results, too--even when the student may not be capable of keeping up with his classmates.

The student in the hall was one of the difficult ones. His parents would never attend a

teacher-parent conference for the purpose of getting guidance for the child; thus, a free public education was the only hope for the boy to be able to discover at a young age the joys of literacy.

Poor social skills, poor academic skills, and poor developmental readiness characterized this difficult first grader. His parents were functionally illiterate and had moved to the Anadarko Basin, lured by the big money that could be made from the deep, rich gas fields beneath the Western Oklahoma location. During the Boom, there were times that we could spot five to ten working rigs in any direction almost any place we stood in Caddo County.

As I stopped to talk with the youngster, the teacher stepped outside the door and pulled me aside.

"He's terrible today," the teacher whispered. "His clothes are slept in, his hair is uncombed, and he's emotionally not ready for class this morning. He's had my class in turmoil ever since he walked through the door. Will you take him to the bathroom and spruce him up a bit and see if you can settle him down?" With twenty-four other six-year-olds, her class was cramped to overflowing caused by the natural gas bonanza.

Therefore, one difficult student could alter a teacher's daily lesson plan -- as well as her psyche--appreciably.

The teacher, a veteran of the classroom, who had no children of her own, adopted every child in her room. Approaching instruction with a missionary zeal, this educator didn't need formal, Biblical in-class instruction to spread God's message of acceptance; nor would this professional ever consider pushing her specific Biblical interpretations onto her students. Every child assigned to her class was loved and respected while her church activities played an important, albeit extra-curricular role, in the community.

A comb and a wet paper towel did wonders for the youngster's disposition. We wiped away last night's sleep as well as a this morning's breakfast, and combed the rats from unruly hair. Having a clean face seemed to wash away some of his nasty demeanor.

"I didn't have time to wash my face this morning. Daddy worked 'til late on the rig, and we stayed up to meet him," the lad explained. "I almost missed the bus."

As we left the restroom sinks to go to my office, I couldn't help but admire the child's enthusiasm. Once inside, I discovered that this first grader had mastered few if any of the pre-requisite kindergarten skills. No wonder the struggle in First Grade.

"I can't write my name," he apologized and then refused to draw a happy face on the chalkboard.

"What can you draw?" I asked as I forcibly handed the reluctant boy a piece of chalk.

The labored efforts of the

first grader to draw were obvious. Most six-year-olds could draw and cut with little difficulty, but not this young man. His scribbles were reduced to a mishmash of unsuccessful attempts to reproduce on the chalkboard what my client saw in his mind.

How can a child be expected to achieve in a classroom when he has few if any related experiences at home? Paper, pencil, and reading were obviously foreign to this little one's home environment. Maybe television had taken its toll, or maybe the constant moving, or just the struggle of familial survival in a tough world had robbed this youngster of [pre-academic] experiences so vital for his elementary success.

With a sticker and a pat on the back, the broad-shouldered student expressed to me a determination to stay in his classroom the rest of the day. And I too shared the student's excitement as I escorted him to his room.

"I don't know how I'm going to make it through the year with this child. I've never disliked any of my students before, but this one is a close first," the teacher whispered as the youngster found his seat. With the sprucing up, the youngster at least looked better, and the teacher was appreciative.

I checked the hallway several times that day but didn't see the troubled child. The next day, though, would be a new day. The lad could just as easily begin any tomorrow as he had this day. As the bell rang and hundreds of students excitedly exited to their buses, the boy's teacher stopped me in the hall.

"I've decided to really think about that boy tonight and find something good about him. If I can't find something good about him soon, we won't make it through the rest of the year," the boy's mentor expressed.

I marvelled as I watched the teacher ready her classroom for the next day. Elementary teachers play an integral part of every student's success but are often forgotten as the youngsters grow older and experience other teachers who seem to play a more significant role in their lives. I couldn't help but wonder what the morrow would bring.

The next morning, I found the teacher as she prepared the morning lunch count.

"I'm ready for my difficult child this morning," the teacher smiled. "Last night I realized how cute this little boy is and how much I appreciate his obvious enthusiasm even though it's generally misdirected. We'll make it through the year," she said with determination.

I felt good--no better--as I left the room that day. Every school day, public education offers non-readers a chance to read, the downtrodden a chance to rise up, and the unaccepted a chance at acceptance. As I think back about that experience, I know that teacher isn't unique--not in America. 🐾

(DALE W. HILL of Washita is becoming one of our regular contributors. An Elementary Counselor for the Anadarko Schools, he earned a Bachelor's degree at OU and a Master's degree at Hays State University. For avocation, he has taught guitar at a vo tech school the past twelve years.)