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## "I Hope This Will Be A Good Year For Me..." : A Career-Changer Stumbles on the Fast Track to Teaching

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**educate**

**"I HOPE THIS WILL BE A GOOD YEAR FOR ME..."  
A CAREER-CHANGER STUMBLES ON THE FAST TRACK TO TEACHING**

**miranda barry**

Claude Brown, the author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, died on February 2, 2002. A few days later, when I saw his obituary in *The New York Times*, I recalled the experience of reading *Manchild* for the first time. This book, along with Richard Wright's *Native Son* and the civil rights and anti-war movements that I participated in during my college years, profoundly affected my values and my sense of purpose in life. After college, I was attracted to a career in film and television because I believed the media could challenge people's habits of mind through promoting empathy with others. At American Playhouse, I was able to adapt *Native Son* and support many other independent films that explored social and ethnic minority cultures in America. Later, as a producer of *Ghostwriter*, I was able to successfully promote literacy strategies while entertaining thousands of school-age children. But in 2002 the media world was changing; it seemed less and less possible to get funding for this type of programming.

Brown's obituary highlighted his relationship with a teacher, Stuart Papanek, who not only taught Brown, but also introduced him to the editor who commissioned *Manchild*. Without Papanek, I reasoned, Brown would not have found a publisher for *Manchild in the Promised Land*; in fact, he probably would not even have written it.

On the page facing the obituary was an ad for the New York City Teaching Fellows: "You still remember your first-grade teacher's name. Who will remember yours?" I was hooked.

People advised me against becoming a Teaching Fellow. One member of the Bank Street faculty was scathing, insisting that the training was inadequate, I was naïve, and I might do more harm than good. My partner, who grew up in inner-city schools in Philadelphia, said, "Those children won't even understand you when you talk to them!" But my longing to make a difference closed my mind to their wisdom. The Teaching Fellows program looked like a chance for me to

step out of my comfort zone and *do* something, to put my concern for children to work in their real lives. I knew it would be hard, but after September 11, and having turned fifty, I needed to feel that I was doing something valuable.

In the spring of 2002, over 15,000 New Yorkers applied for posts in the Teaching Fellows program. Many of us, after September 11, wanted to show faith in the future by serving children. I was thrilled to be among the 2,000 chosen.

Our first step was a job fair. The first assistant principal I met hired me. Then, once we were attached to a district, we were assigned to a university for course work and divided into small groups with a teacher-mentor who would guide us through the seven-week training.

Despite the nine-hour days followed by homework, I loved being back in school. I loved learning from my peers. I loved reading textbooks and writing research papers. I especially loved practice teaching, working in a summer classroom with 12 fifth graders and an experienced teacher. It was fun.

We Fellows-in-training took two literacy classes and a child development course at Fordham; in UFT workshops at district headquarters we learned “ice-breakers” and discussed arranging classroom furniture. Our preparation seemed haphazard and disorganized, but I figured we’d eventually be given a curriculum that would pull the pieces together. When we received the New York City standards in ELA, math, and social studies, I was astonished to see how little guidance they offered on what we were to teach or how we were to teach it. There was only one session on classroom management offered, and it was optional. It was scheduled for the vacation week after the end of our training period, and I’d already bought a non-refundable plane ticket. Few Fellows attended.

There was a celebration of the end of our training at the Bronx Zoo. We took the licensing exam. Because I passed the exam on the first try, I was placed as a head teacher in a classroom of 35 fifth graders. I had never seen the textbooks I’d be using; I didn’t even know what grade I would be teaching until a week before classes started.

The school was in a relatively new building that covered a whole block in the Parkchester section of the Bronx, a diverse and economically mixed neighborhood. Students spoke 10 different home languages. Classrooms were large, with

big windows. There were two copy machines for 60 teachers and about 2,000 children, grades K-6. We had to supply our own paper. I spent as much as \$50 a day at Kinko's, where I'd stop at 6:00 a.m. on my way to school. My wonderful partner Xeroxed mountains of content for me, which was necessary because I did not have a full set of any of the textbooks I was supposed to use. I carried books and papers to school in a suitcase on wheels, which weighed a ton as I hauled it up to the fourth floor. New teachers did not get keys to the elevator.

We had been told that the administration would take note of the attractiveness of our rooms, but by the time school started in September, not one of the administrators who had hired me in June was still at the school. Trainers also advised us not to smile until Halloween, or better yet, Thanksgiving. The day before school started, my neighboring teacher remarked, "You are in for a shock." When I asked why, he shrugged, paused as if he was considering what to say to someone as clueless as I, and offered, "Some of these students are really ... angry."

I spent the week before school scrubbing grime out of the corners of the room and decorating it with posters to welcome the "All Star Class." I planned to explain that children who did their best to learn all week would see their names on the stage of the All Star Class poster, and become eligible for awards and prizes. I marked each seat with a child's name in a big red star. I put pencil boxes on the tables with crayons, scissors, Scotch tape, glue sticks and correction fluid. I posted a list of classroom jobs and asked students to write a letter telling which one they wanted and why they felt they were qualified for it. I invented Multiplication Volleyball, a game played with an aluminum foil ball, to energize students and smooth the transition between the literacy period and math.

The children seemed bewildered by the All-Star scheme, but open to it. One quiet and thoughtful boy said, his eyelids halfway lowered, "I hope this is going to be a good year for me." I hoped so too.

The pencil boxes had to be put away within an hour because children were painting themselves, each other, and the furniture with correction fluid. By the middle of the second week, I had laryngitis from talking loud enough to be heard over the classroom noise. By the third week, I was not able to keep the students quiet and focused from 8:20 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., when we had lunch. Our Fordham

course that semester was on classroom management, but when I brought my troubles to the professor she told me that we wouldn't be covering that topic until November.

The assistant principal took an interest in my class. At first, when she observed my teaching, she said I was “a natural” and would catch on quickly, but then friction began to develop. She said that classroom jobs should be rewards for good behavior and that too many students were acting up to justify having such a program. She asked me to send a letter home demanding that all the parents come to school for a meeting about discipline. I didn't think things were bad enough to warrant that, so I didn't follow through. She told me that the transition game, like the jobs, should be withheld because the students were noisy when they played it, but I felt that the release of tension and chance to move around were essential if the children were going to stay focused for more than four hours. I was assigned a mentor in the school, a tiny, ancient woman who had taught first and second grade for many years. One day she gave a lesson in which she got my whole class mooing. They laughed about her for a week. The school sent in a special education teacher to coteach the literacy period with me. She shouted at the students and insulted and humiliated them. Though she was kind to me outside the classroom, I could not imitate her approach—it just wasn't in me.

But I wasn't ready to give up yet.

Our class was supposed to post a bulletin board in the hallway, and I wanted the students to have something to display that they were proud of, so I started a geography project. Pairs of students selected U.S. states by pulling jigsaw puzzle pieces out of a bag, traced them, and researched their capitals, geography, and industries. It seemed to go well, and my hopes began to rise a little.

Some students couldn't stay seated. Regina, for example, would be calm and attentive one day, but wriggle in her chair the next, talking back and hitting others. Her guardian told me that her mother had had “some problems with drugs” during pregnancy. Once when Regina was especially distracted, I asked her to come sit at a desk near me in the front of the room. She seemed to like this special place and did not want to leave it at the end of the day. I let her stay there. The next time she felt restless, she went to the back of the classroom and straight-

ened out the library. I thought this was an incredible gesture on her part; rather than disrupting the class, she used her restless energy for something constructive.

The students and I were getting to know one another, but there were still unexpected squalls. One afternoon, a girl suddenly jumped up and grabbed the boy sitting behind her, strangling and shaking him. Soon half the class was fighting, boys against girls. It turned out that the boy had called the girl a “hootchie” on the playground that morning, and she’d stewed about it all day till she snapped. The boy told me that he thought a “hootchie” was somebody who dressed nicely.

There were times when the students actually came to my rescue. One morning, I found a note in my mailbox telling me to take the class to gym at 10:00 a.m. The children loved gym, and I reminded them (per instructions from my AP) that they’d have to behave in order to have this special gym period. We arrived at precisely 10:00 a.m. All 35 children burst joyfully into the gym, running, hollering, and playing with loose basketballs. Then a custodian told me that the gym teacher had been asked to cover another class. How could I organize my students to take them back to our room? It was like herding cats! In desperation, I approached the tallest, most intimidating girl in the class and said,

“Tiffany, I need your help.”

She looked at me, stone-faced. “What for?”

“I need you to get the girls into a line to go back to our classroom.”

Tiffany’s eyes opened wide and then narrowed. “Why are you asking me?”

“Because I think the girls look up to you.”

Tiffany moved. The girls were lined up in less than two minutes, and I had no trouble getting the boys to follow. That moment will remain with me forever as an example of what can happen when you give young people a little of the respect they deserve.

I thought that with just a little more classroom management support, I might be able to succeed. Other teachers told me that I had six of the “worst kids in the school,” and advised me to transfer them out, but the idea of taking that on defeated me. I didn’t believe in the concept of “worst kids.” There wasn’t one of my students who didn’t sometimes have a good day. I hoped to get one of the Fellows who had not passed the licensing exam on the first try to work as my

partner for a few weeks, and the AP agreed.

The crisis came on a Friday in late October, when the district superintendent was visiting with her associates. I'd just finished a writing exercise when I heard a single shout; a boy was staggering toward me with blood pouring down his face. I called security, the nurse, the assistant principal, and even the principal's office, but they were all meeting with the superintendent. Pressing a towel to the injured boy's wound, I sent him to the nurse's office with another student. Then a police officer burst into the room, identified Kabir as the attacker, handcuffed him, and marched him out like a criminal.

Kabir had brought a small rubber ball to school, and another boy had taken it from him, teased him with it, and thrown it out the window while I was occupied with other students. Enraged, Kabir jumped up and struck one blow on the back of the other boy's head. He then fell forward and cut his forehead on the edge of the desk. No brawl, no premeditation—but Kabir was taken to the police station.

The following Monday, I found a note in my box from the assistant principal saying that there was “never any learning” going on in my classroom, which was always filled with “violence” and “chaos.” She said she had repeatedly tried to help me, but that I hadn't taken her direction. I was being reported, and the letter would go into my file. The Fellow who had been designated to help me was re-assigned.

Our UFT representative said that I should refuse to countersign the letter, but I was too discouraged and disappointed by my own failure as a teacher to fight back. What was clear was that if I were going to continue to teach, I'd need more training and a much better understanding of the children and school culture. While I was resigning, I learned that 25% of the new Teaching Fellows had left before I did; over 500 people quit in the first two months.

The principal told me not to tell my students I was leaving. Bizarre as that seemed, I agreed. Then the assistant principal told them at lunchtime so that I would have a chance to say goodbye. The girls cried and everyone hugged me. I promised to come back for a visit at the end of term (which I did); I told them I was leaving not because they were a bad class, but because I was not a good

enough teacher for them. To my great surprise, when I went to the assistant principal to say goodbye and apologize, she gave me a referral to the high school where she had spent ten happy years teaching.

In retrospect, I realize that those who had warned me against the program were right. Like many lay people, I believed that the problem in schools resided with burned-out teachers. In reality, most of the teachers at my school were devoted professionals. They worked hard and effectively to teach all kinds of children in the face of classes that were too large and an administration that was more concerned with covering its tracks than supporting its staff. In fairness, the AP did truly try to help me. I should have insisted that the parents come to school, as she had suggested, instead of seeking to build better relations with the children first. I really did not understand the tone that children in this neighborhood expected from a teacher, and it was arrogant of me to believe that my friendly approach would succeed better than that of the experienced professionals. It must have been frustrating for my AP when I did not take her suggestions—after all, she, too, had to function in the atmosphere of suspicion that prevailed at the school. Just as teachers were not encouraged to develop a community in their classroom by trusting their students and giving them opportunities to succeed, administrative staff were not encouraged to trust teachers and work with their strengths to overcome their weaknesses—and, given the number of teachers each AP supervised, maybe that would have been impossible.

I was devastated by my failure and spent the rest of the school year deciding whether I really wanted to teach at all. I tutored and I codirected a production of *Romeo and Juliet* with 100 eighth graders at East Side Middle School. When I knew what I was doing, I found I had little trouble with discipline. I came to believe I could teach if I took the time to learn how to do it right. So that spring I applied to Bank Street to get the training I'd need to work in a real-world classroom.

In the end, the cost of graduate school, on top of having no income for three years, made it impossible for me to consider living on a beginning teacher's salary. (The real cost for me, including the loss of a \$40,000 salary and health insurance for three years, plus tuition and books, was nearly \$180,000!) A fantastic

job opportunity came up—producing Sesame Street in Northern Ireland and India—and I took it. The training and experience I had at Bank Street serves me daily as I work with colleagues to meet children’s and teachers’ needs, but on a personal level I am grateful to those children in the Bronx who taught me, even in failure, to respect, show humility, and persevere.

With Bank Street behind me, I know that the first year of teaching would still be very hard, but I’ve studied with master teachers in graduate courses and apprenticed with excellent teachers in their classrooms. I’ve taught for entire days on many occasions, learned to observe children’s strengths and weaknesses, and crafted curricula that I’ve seen through to completion over several weeks. No seven-week training course could offer that.

I see now that I should have been tougher with my class—not “mean,” but more definite and consistent in demanding their attention and participation. If I had already taken the social studies course at Bank Street, where we designed a thorough curriculum for students with various learning styles and levels of literacy, it would have helped me set a course that all of us—students and teacher alike—could have understood and followed. If I had read Lisa Delpit and thought about her insight into the needs of inner-city students, I might have been able to give my class both structure and encouragement. But as it was, I could not understand what my supervisors wanted from me. And I did not listen effectively because I felt inadequate as I struggled to find a way to be a teacher and myself.

The only way a Teaching Fellow model could work, in my opinion, would be if Fellows spent at least a semester, if not a year, co-teaching with a good mentor before taking on a classroom of their own. Idealistic newcomers might still improve the student-teacher ratio and bring fresh enthusiasm to schools, but they would not be expected to be in charge of a classroom until they had at least learned to speak and understand the language.

## **COLLABORATIONS FOR SUCCESS:**