

Globe and Mail, Facts and Arguments, May 4, 1998

Farewell, little inner-city school

My kids are not overburdened with old-fashioned learning, but they know a lot about diversity, flexibility, tolerance and caution, about coping in a complex, fast-moving world.

I never thought saying goodbye to a school would be a wrenching experience, but I may shed a few tears when the time comes. My kids have been part of the life of a small Toronto public school for seven years, from September 1991 when my daughter arrived for Grade 5, to this June, when her younger brother will walk out of Grade 8 to head for high school, nearly two feet taller than the day he walked in.

It's an ordinary little round elementary and middle school at the centre of the city, filled with children who have come from all over the world to the most multi-cultural society on earth, or so they tell us. My son has just made friends with a girl recently arrived from Africa, whose mother was a princess in her village there. His other friends are Chinese, Portuguese, Sri Lankan, Polish, even a Caucasian or two, like him.

Through the years, I marvelled that the home and school committee, an extraordinarily diverse group of opinionated parents, ever got things done, but it did, and one parent, Bernadette, brought freshly baked cookies to every meeting. I saw the difference made by a good principal, the person who sets so much of a school's agenda, the hum of generosity or pettiness or chaos inside its walls. I learned that if the heart of a school is positive and vigilant, a kid will flow through good and bad teachers and prosper nonetheless.

We all have memories of special times there. My kids remember basketball games, teachers, dances, friends and enemies. I remember Family Music Night, when I made an enthusiastic debut in the Japanese art of karaoke - "Killing me Softly", in the staff room - which luckily my offspring did not witness.

Together the school and I weathered crisis after crisis with my children: countless emergency calls, a croaking voice complaining of a raging fever, sometimes legitimate, sometimes on math test day; the time my son drew graffiti all over the men's washroom, but only in pencil; my daughter's regular visits to the principal, who was concerned that she was taking her friends more seriously than her education, and he was right.

It was far from perfect, this school. Though there were some good teachers and a few exceptional ones - my heroes, the teachers who still like and care and think about the kids they deal with, and teaching itself - there were also those who've done things the same way for decades and don't see any reason to change now; those who proceed, it sometimes seems, with little concern for the feelings of the children in their care. There were problems of violence; my daughter was terrified by an older girl who offered to rip her face off for an imagined slight. The students regularly found needles and condoms on the playground, hookers on the periphery of the playground - and it wasn't much of a playground in any case.

My kids are not emerging from this school - how can I put this? - over-burdened with classical learning. I hate to compare what they actually know with what the children of my friend from France have covered in their rigorous education. Still, when my French friend, who's a teacher herself, visited recently, she told me how much she wishes her school had some of the innovations in place here: the Learning Centre and the Resource Room, the Mentorship program, the Problem Solvers program, the science and nature camp, the sex education, the anti-racism, anti-smoking, anti-homophobia and anti-drug initiatives. My kids don't read Latin, but they do know a lot about diversity, flexibility, tolerance and caution, how to cope with the complex fast-changing world into which they will soon move.

What I loved most were the end-of-year concerts. As I sat crushed in the stuffy gym, straining to see children from kindergarten to Grade 8 sing, dance and play instruments, I was always moved to patriotic pride. This is my country, this is Canada, these parents of every race and religion, focussed on that sea of children - that vast, multi-coloured, shining sea.

Now I have only one more assembly to attend there - the graduation of my son's class. His male friends have unrecognizable, deep voices and burly shoulders; the girls are all intrigue, hair gel and giggles. Many of them, I know, have had a hard growing-up, parents divorced or broke or troubled, their own conflicts, some toying dangerously, now, with drugs of all kinds and sex. One young friend has such a burdened soul that she tried not long ago to take her own life; a month later, she was back at school. She and the others are on the basketball, baseball and volleyball teams, in the band and the choir; they speak French, they play the saxophone, they work hard on their science projects for the yearly science fair. This year my son's project is entitled "Friction" and involves little cars and molasses; that's all I want to know.

This inner-city public school has struggled through the government's and the school board's yearly policy switches. Right now, though, it's dealing with a truly hostile battering, a destructive cyclone of cuts and changes. Somehow, even during its own upheavals, the school never failed to help my kids through bad times, making them feel protected and cared for. These days, though there are still a few brave green ribbons of protest fluttering from the trees outside, it feels to me as if it's the school itself that's at risk, in need of protection.

We're leaving something behind. My son has donated his two black gerbils to a grade five class; children enjoy the company of creatures smaller and more dependent than they. In September the gerbils will entertain ten year olds in the little round school, and the tall teenage boy who doesn't have time for them any more will push open the doors to the next stage of his life.

We would like to thank Mrs. Alikakos and Mr. Friberg, Mr. Milliken, Miss Klebanoff, Mr. Nicholson, Madame Alimi, Mr. Tom, Madame Sweetman, Ms. Cooney, Mr. Harding, Mr. Slobodian, Mr. Williams, Mr. Wiwa, Mrs. Trainor, Miss DeFalco, Ms. Megill, Miss Nichol, and many, many others. Thank you from all of us. May you miraculously, despite all, prevail.