

Washington Elementary School

When I joined the Yale faculty in 1968, I was reluctant to use my personal experiences as a source of insight, as a data base. But I needed to understand the different outcomes for me and my siblings as opposed to those for my friends, and with the encouragement of a few colleagues, I came to understand my experience as a unique window on complex and challenging problems. This perspective led in 1972 to the publication of *Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of a Black Family*. This short chapter is an illustration of the complex way in which race, class, family, and culture issues can play out in school to create challenges and opportunities, and how parents and other authority figures interact to protect and promote a child's effort and capacity to negotiate his or her environment and acquire a solid platform and springboard for lifelong performance.

MY FIFTH BIRTHDAY WAS THREE WEEKS AFTER THE START OF SCHOOL. Mom had to entertain her club at our house that day, so she arranged to have a party for me at school. I loved being the birthday boy.

The next day, one of my white classmates begged me to take a different route and walk by his house on the way home. His mother was hanging laundry on the back porch of their second-story apartment. He called up to her triumphantly, "Ma, this is the boy that had the party in school yesterday!"

The mother looked at me quizzically and said, "You didn't really have a birthday party, did you?" I indicated that I did. "Well!" she said. "It's the first time I ever heard of a nigger having any kind of a party but a drunken brawl." She turned and walked into the house. I was too young to fully understand. But I knew that she said something bad about me. I cried.

That incident was unusual. All four of us—me, Norman, Charles, Thelma—were occasionally invited to the birthday parties of our white classmates, and we were always treated well. I didn't tell mom what happened after my kindergarten party, but she was cautious anyway and always called to make certain that the parents knew that we were black and to determine whether we were welcome or not.

At one birthday party, the party boy's mother told us that we were all welcome and that she wanted us to all have a good time. I was the only black kid there, and she looked at me with a big smile and said, "And you too." The other kids appeared puzzled by the special recognition—I was one of the gang—but they dismissed the comment and kept going. I understood, felt a little uncomfortable, but also kept going. Being one of the gang was important to me, maybe no more than to any other kid, but maybe more. I still remember that when we exchanged valentine cards in the second grade I got seventeen—the second highest total in the class.

This was the same Washington Elementary School that my oldest sister Louise had gone to more than a decade before. It still served the highest-income group in our town, but now served a larger number of working-class white families. Because the black families lived at the fringe of the school district, there were only three other black students in kindergarten. The only black staff was the school janitor. But the school was a real part of the community, and I felt like a part of the school.

I used to go shopping with my mother, father, brothers, and sisters at the A&P Store in the neighborhood every Friday. We would

see somebody from our school there almost every time—Miss McFeeley, the principal; the school clerk; one or two teachers. “How are you?” “Fine.” “How are you?” And “How is Jim doing in school?” It was tough to do anything but behave properly and work hard when your parents were in contact with school people like that.

Mom never missed Parent Visitation Day. She was always well dressed and seemed to get along well with my teachers. Norman told me that he was glad Mom came because he noticed, as a little kid, that the kids whose parents came to school received more attention. Robert English, a black classmate of Norman’s, said that he didn’t want his mother in school because “she might embarrass me in front of these white folks.”

There were occasional problems. Mom didn’t sidestep them just to get along. Once I heard her on the telephone, talking calmly but forcefully to our principal.

“No, I don’t teach my children to fight. I teach them not to fight.”

(Pause.)

“I most certainly teach them to defend themselves—whatever way necessary. Even you admit that Norman didn’t do anything to that boy. He was bigger, and he was sitting on Norman’s head. I would expect him to bite him or do whatever else is necessary to get him off his head.”

(Pause.)

“If there’s a charge for the doctor bill, we’ll pay it. But I don’t expect my children to let anybody walk over them.”

I was about nine at the time. And another incident from that period stands out in my memory. At that awkward age, there was nothing about me that resembled a swan, black or white. I wore thick glasses, had buck teeth—earning me, in 1943, the nickname “Hirohito.” One day, the gym coach had us going through calisthenics. I didn’t perform very well. That weekend my friend Madison

Turner was teasing me about having to duck-waddle as punishment. Mom overheard, connected the sore muscles I had with the punishment, and was ready to take on the coach on Monday morning. I was awkward, generally the last person chosen for gym class softball teams. Now I was going to be subjected to the ultimate embarrassment, my mother going to see the coach! But when Mom called on Monday morning, she discovered that the coach had had a heart attack over the weekend and died.

The rational side of me understood that it was a medical illness. But his death confirmed a small irrational side of me that said, "It's dangerous to take on Mom."

One year, Charles got an unsatisfactory warning note—the infamous pink letter. Mom had the four of us in the car driving down Columbus Drive, then still the major way to get to Chicago, when she chose to deal with Charles about his poor performance. He had a special way with Mom and could provoke her far beyond her tolerance level with me and Norman.

She said, "You can do better than that!"

He knew that there must be a mistake, but he said, "No, I can't."

"You can!"

"I can't."

"You can!"

"I can't."

Finally, Mom got so frustrated she stopped the car in the middle of the street and said, "You can!!!"

Mom was not the best driver in the world, nor was Dad, for that matter. I was always a bit nervous when we got in the car, although I always wanted to go. But this was more than that. We were stopped in the middle of Columbus Drive, the busiest street in town—right in front of the main fire station. Cars were whizzing by, and I could imagine that at any second, the fire engines would roar out of

the station. I was terrified! I could have choked Charles. Tell her you can, and get us out of here, I thought to myself!

As it turned out, a mistake had been made. The teacher was new in the school and didn't know our family. There were only two black kids in the class. The unsatisfactory notice was intended for the other black student.

It appeared to me that good grades could save me from a lot of grief, at home and at school. Even my buddies from the neighborhood approved. The black kids walked toward our section of the school district together. When report cards came out, somebody would yell to somebody else, "The Comers got all A's again!" And the teasing would start—"That's why they got those big heads—headquarters. They have to store all them brains!"

Sometimes, though, academic excellence didn't help. I used to arrange to pass by Mrs. Weldon's house, my fourth-grade teacher who lived about two blocks from school, just about the time she was leaving. We would walk hand in hand to school. We got a gold star for every library book we read, and before long, I had the most gold stars of anybody in the class. Almost everybody else had read at least one book. But my three buddies, Rudy George, Nathan English, and Madison Turner, the three other black kids in our class, had read none. Mrs. Weldon was furious with them and lashed out in front of everybody: "If you three little colored boys can't be like the rest of us, you should not come to our school!" Her words stabbed me to the heart. This little colored boy never went by her house again.

The next year, I became even more race-conscious. To correct an overcrowding problem at Columbus School, black students were transferred to Washington School for the fourth and fifth grades. One of the few blacks at Washington and well accepted there, I was in the middle of the adjustment process. My sister, Louise, had been a teacher of the black kids from Columbus; thus, they were my

friends also. And my father frequently talked of “our people”—black people. So where did I stand?

In one class, we selected a new set of officers on a weekly basis. After a while, it was clear to me that the whites were choosing whites—except for me—and the blacks were being closed out. Impulsively, I jumped to the floor and accused my white friends of doing so. When I sat down, it occurred to me that my white teacher might be upset. She sat in the back of the room and knitted while we carried out the mock government activities. I looked back to measure her reaction. She gave me a wink of approval. It reinforced what I had learned at home: you are supposed to fight for what is right. I became the middle man—diplomat of peaceful relations. After that, the white students began selecting some of the students from Columbus.

The real showdown came with Glen and Lincoln. Glen was a tough white kid, the brother of my friend David, whom I walked to school with almost every day. Glen had established himself as the schoolyard bully. Lincoln was the toughest kid from the Columbus School. They had had two previous fights that year, one won by Glen and one by Lincoln. And finally, the third was scheduled. The excitement swept the school. Everybody seemed to know about it except the principal and the teachers.

No direct racial incident caused the fight, but the black boys were on one side and the white boys on the other. Lincoln punished Glen badly, knocking him down three or four times. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, Glen dropped to one knee, his hands in a praying position, and begged Lincoln not to hit him again. The black kids cheered. The white kids turned away in embarrassment. I didn’t like what I saw. Lincoln was my friend, but I didn’t dislike Glen; he never bothered me. I didn’t like the racial overtones.

Several of the black kids from Columbus were very smart, potentially as good academically as anybody in our class. During the

summer between fifth and sixth grade, I went to a Sunday school convention and Bible study class along with five of the best students from Columbus, all girls. Everybody expected me to make the highest score because I often did so in the public school. But in the Bible school class, I had the lowest score. These girls didn't say anything at Washington School and weren't generally thought of as good students. In retrospect, I believed they scored well in the Sunday school convention class because it was a place where they were accepted and relaxed. They were intimidated in the public school.

By this point, it was crystal-clear to me that being a good student could save me from some of the indignities that my black friends experienced in school. The word was out. White equaled good and smart. Black equaled bad and dumb. If you were smart and black, you might salvage a little. For this reason, being the best, being perfect became very important—too important. Too many black students work under this pressure, even today.

For example, in my science class in sixth grade, I had twenty-four of the twenty-five questions on the test correct and I knew it. But I also knew the answer to the twenty-fifth; I just couldn't recall it. Finally, when the teacher wasn't looking, I looked in the book and got the answer. He caught me. He walked over, took my paper, tore it up, and gave me a zero. I stood up and my legs buckled, my throat went dry. It was the most embarrassing moment of my young life. I needed 100; I wanted to be first; I had to show that I wasn't dumb.

