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No Zombies Allowed

Let there be no doubt: a "skilled" minority person who is not also capable of critical analysis becomes the trainable, low-level functionary of the dominant society, simply the grease that keeps the institutions which orchestrate his or her oppression running smoothly. On the other hand, a critical thinker who lacks the "skills" demanded by employers and institutions of higher learning can aspire to financial and social status only within the disenfranchised underworld.

—Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children*

"This class is called Media Studies," I announced to the poker-faced collection of eighth graders who had just assembled before me. It was the first period of the first day of my fourth year as a teacher, the first time I'd begun a school year with a full-sized classroom of my own, and my first day of being at the helm of this newly invented, untried course.

I hate first days. When I was 8, I'd ended up in the hospital after a bike wreck during my family's first day at a new house. A dozen or so years later, on my first day on the transportation crew of a feature film, I'd wrecked the wardrobe truck I was responsible for driving. On my first day as a substitute, the kids had run so many laps around the room and the adjoining coat closet that they had me searching the teacher's desk for a checkered flag. During my first 6 years in the classroom, I never had a good first day. Perhaps my insistence on kicking things off each year with a plodding, long-winded opening speech had something to do with it.

"The class is made up of two parts," I continued, palms resting on a wobbly podium, "video production and critical viewing—or critical examination—of the media. We'll talk about what those are in a minute. But first I want to be clear about something right from the start. I know you're all looking behind me, checking out these cameras and the other equipment in here." It was like trying to hold class in front of a toy store window or in the stands at a Bulls game. "But let me tell you this. The point of this class is not to turn you into movie stars, or even to teach you how to operate a video camera—though that's a small part of it. This class

is about much more than that. For one thing, it's about you becoming more confident about speaking up and expressing yourself, not just when cameras are rolling, but anytime. It's about helping you realize that each of you has important things to say. It's about giving you opportunities to be creative. And it's about teaching you to look at television—and other media, too—more intelligently. What many of us do when we turn on the TV is turn off our brains. We don't really think much about what it is we're watching and why. But I want you guys to start thinking. I want you to be smarter than your TVs."

As I paused to take a much-needed breath, a hand went up to my right. "Question?"

"Yeah. When do we get to start using the cameras?" So much for my strategically planned introduction.

The idea for the Media Studies course had evolved out of another idea—an after-school video production crew that I'd begun the year before. Marcey Reyes, Quincy's new principal, had been impressed with the kids' work and how well they used the medium of video to communicate. She thought all of Quincy's upper graders could benefit from such an experience, and suggested I expand the after-school program into a full-fledged video production class. When the time came to make the next fall's teaching assignments, Marcey allocated classroom space for a make-shift studio and gave me free rein to design my own course.

I began planning the class over the summer, unsure of what its exact scope or sequence should be. Most high school TV studio programs I knew of emphasized the technical or vocational side of things. Another approach was to teach video the way one might teach sculpting or painting, as an art form. But both of these approaches seemed too narrow, too limiting. Of course I wanted to teach the kids technical skills, and I wanted them to learn to use video as a tool to express their creativity and ideas. But I also wanted to help them become more active and aware as viewers of television and consumers of media. For most, TV was where they got the bulk of their information about the world outside their neighborhood. They watched it before school and after school, sometimes late into the night. It influenced them in both blatantly direct and artfully camouflaged ways. Viewed in this light, teaching kids to make TV without teaching them to understand it seemed as if it might do more harm than good. I decided that the course should attempt to combine the basics of production with a critical study of mass media, television in particular.

I knew that a media studies course would likely be met with skepticism by certain teachers at Quincy, who believed that any time in school away from reading, writing, and arithmetic was time wasted. They would

probably see it as an extra, a fluff course that was but one more step away from the all-important “basics” in which our children were seen to be so sorely lacking. But what could be more basic, for kids growing up in the media-drenched, commercially saturated 1990s, than the ability to question, analyze, and evaluate the barrage of messages that bombarded them? Wasn't that one of the marks of a truly literate person? Wasn't that what we were after?

“To succeed in this class, you have to *think*,” I told the kids after my opening monologue had finally reached its end. “No zombies allowed.” As one of them did his best impersonation of a creature from *Night of the Living Dead*, we discussed how both teachers and students can become zombified in school. But I knew I couldn't fight students' disengagement by creating slogans that forbade it, and I couldn't make students think simply by telling them it was required. I had to find ways to engage them. I had to find things for them to *do*—things that were relevant, things that would interest them, things that could not be accomplished without the one element that sometimes seems most foreign to school classrooms: real, live, unadulterated thinking.

I FLIPPED ON the classroom light and pushed STOP on the VCR's remote control. The group of 12 seventh graders, who sat around two tables arranged in boomerang formation, immediately began to whine.

“Awww! Mr. Michie!”

“What?”

“We wanna see the rest!” We had just finished viewing a 10-minute clip of the *Jerry Springer* show entitled “I'm a 13-Year-Old Prostitute.” The subject in question had confided to Jerry and an amused studio audience that with her mother's encouragement, she had begun taking drugs at 7, having sex at 8, and prostituting at 9. Just before the first commercial break, there had been a teaser for the next segment that showed the girl and her mother about to come to blows.

“You don't need to see the rest,” I insisted. “You already know what's gonna happen.”

“Her mom's gonna come out and they're gonna box!” acknowledged Nacho with a jab at the air.

“I wanna see her clip her ma!” added Claudio.

“See?” I said to the class. “You already know what's coming. It's so predictable. If you've seen one of this genre, you've seen them all.” I could see a couple of the kids rolling the word *genre* over in the heads.

“Genre, genre . . . I can't remember what's genre,” said Nacho.

“Who remembers?” I asked. “What's a genre?” Several students be-

gan to flip through their notes. “Huh-uh! I know you can read something back to me. I want to know if you know it.”

Paloma spoke up. “Isn't it like—a classification or category or something like that?”

“Exactly. And each genre shares certain characteristics. Like right now, we're looking at talk shows. What are some of the similarities between Jerry Springer's show and the clip of *Ricki Lake* we watched yesterday?”

“They both got guests sitting on a stage.”

“And a host who walks around.”

“They both have fights and people using bad words.”

“How about the way they represent young people?” I asked.

Blank stares.

“All right, let's say you're from another planet,” I told the kids. “You don't know anything about what humans are like, what teenagers are like, and you land your spaceship at the *Jerry Springer* show. If that's all the evidence you have to go on, what are you going to think teenagers are like?”

“I'd think they were stupid.”

“Crazy.”

“Disrespectful.”

“Dangerous.”

“It's a lotta stereotypes,” summed up Nacho, grinning slyly at his use of a recent vocabulary word.

“Okay, good,” I said. “So let's talk about this particular segment of *Jerry Springer*. Let's deconstruct it.” The kids already knew what deconstruct meant. Some of them did, anyway. During the first few weeks of class I had immersed them in the basics of production and critical viewing. While doing video interviews with one another they had learned technical terms for the different camera movements, shots, and angles. Analytical terms such as target audience, gimmick, covert message, and point-of-view had been used early on as we examined magazine and television advertisements.

I went to the board, where I had listed the kids' ideas about the possible purposes of talk shows: to make money, to help people, to solve problems, to entertain, to inform. “What do you think was the main purpose of this show, besides to make money?” We had already agreed that the number-one aim of any commercial television program was to turn a profit.

“I think it was to help the girl to stop using drugs and being a prostitute and all that,” offered Silvia.

"They weren't trying to help her!" Claudio exclaimed.

"Hang on a second, Claudio. Give her a chance," I said. "Silvia, why do you think that? What happened on the show to make you think that?"

"Well, after she told about all the stuff that she done, Jerry asked her if she wanted to stop—"

"And then the audience all started cheering like she could just stop 'cause he said so," Claudio added. "That's stupid."

"So what do you think the main purpose of the show was?" I asked Claudio.

"Simple. To entertain. You heard all those people laughing. They weren't taking it serious."

"Anybody agree with Claudio?"

"I kind of agree with both of them," Abraham answered. "The show started off all serious, like showing the girl looking straight in the camera—and it was in black and white, an extreme close-up shot—telling what had happened to her. So it seemed like, you know, a serious thing. But then when they introduced Jerry, he came running out giving high fives and the crowd was all, 'Jerry! Jerry!' like they were at a wrestling match."

"I don't think they had any respect for the girl," commented Paloma. "'Cause when she would talk and they would put her name up on the screen, underneath it would say '13-year-old prostitute.' Like that was her job. I don't think they told her they were gonna do that."

"Do you think she went on the show thinking she would get help?"

"I think so," said Silvia softly.

"She just wanted to be on TV," Claudio countered. "She's just up there making a fool of herself."

"Well, you shouldn't be laughing about it," Paloma told him. "There's nothing funny about it."

"I agree," I said. "It shouldn't be funny. But they showed people in the audience laughing and I saw some of you guys laughing, too. Why is it funny?"

"'Cause it's happening to her and not us," admitted Nacho.

"What if it was your sister up there?"

"Then he wouldn't be laughing," Silvia offered.

"How could the producers have made this program—with the same topic, and the same guests—in a different way?" I asked. "In a way that would have been more respectful and more helpful."

"The first thing they could've done is change the title," said Paloma. "And not be so hyper about it."

I sat down at the table next to Silvia. "You guys know what it means to get used by a friend or boyfriend or girlfriend, right?"

"They take advantage of you."

"They get what they want from you and then jet."

"Do you think that girl—and other guests on talk shows—get used in a sense by the producers and the hosts?"

"Yeah," answered the kids as a chorus.

"And so do we," Paloma added. "We get used, too."

"How?" I asked, not sure where she was headed.

"'Cause we watch 'em."

For homework, the kids were assigned to watch a talk show and answer several questions about its content and how it was presented. Specifically, they were asked to identify ways in which the guests or the topics were exploited. A few weeks later, after several days of preparation and planning, Paloma and her classmates produced their own talk show on the topic of domestic violence, with guests from a local counseling center. The format resembled the talk shows we had discussed in class, but the style was much different: No one was yelled at, cursed at, punched, kicked, or called names during the entire show.

AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION in any media literacy course, I came to realize, is using programs the kids watch as texts for study. This might be soap operas, pro wrestling, music videos, commercials, cartoons—whatever students at a given age are spending their time viewing. Trying to indoctrinate them with "quality" television isn't the point. Better to teach them to become more discriminating themselves, to be able to see through the glitz and pseudo-style of a program to what lies underneath. While tabloid talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* and reality-based shows such as *Cops* may seem to offer little of value to children, they are loaded with dubious underlying themes and skewed social commentary that beg a debriefing—and whether we like it or not, many kids watch them.

Some educators would shudder at the thought of using Marcia Brady or Al Bundy as subjects of serious study. But in many ways, the "texts" of which these characters are a part are richer and more multilayered than the textbooks and basal readers that clutter classroom shelves. I spent several weeks with my eighth grade classes that year examining, discussing, and comparing various situation comedies, from *The Brady Bunch* and *Leave It to Beaver* to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *Married with Children*. We began by defining the characteristics of the genre (30 minutes long, often set in a household, audible laughter, high-key lighting, problem always resolved) as well as the different types of humor used (physical, situational misunderstandings, one-liners, insults, sexual). The kids also undertook an informal demographic study of the most popular sitcoms and discovered that there were none that featured Latino or Arabic families or characters. In addition, except for *Roseanne*, sitcom families ap-

peared to be either upper middle class or wealthy. Most lived in houses instead of apartments. Money never seemed to be a problem. Gradually it became clearer to the kids that the lifestyle and cultural norms depicted in many sitcoms reflect only a narrow slice of America. They found little in the programs that truly looked like their own experience, and while a number of them enjoyed watching the shows, there were few who thought they were realistic. "I watch them but sometimes it gets to me," Yesenia explained one day in class. "Everybody is so happy, and everything gets resolved in half an hour. They solve everything with a little hug. In real life, that rarely happens."

To evaluate our study, I gave the kids an essay test consisting of 10 questions, from which they had to choose and answer 5. A couple of examples:

Compare the character of June Cleaver (Beaver's mom) to the character of Roseanne. Which character do you think is a better role model for girls? Explain your answer.

June is a bit too much of the old days. All she does is dust, dust, dust, and more dust. Every time she comes out in the show she's wearing an apron and cleaning. She also has almost no say in the house. Whenever there is a problem the kids go to the father. In Roseanne it is different. She has most of the say in the house. She has a job and also cleans the house sometimes. The kids go to her for help with problems. On television, she is the mother of all mothers. Roseanne is a better influence because girls will know they can be more than housewives who have no say in what goes on.

Jorge

When Leave It to Beaver and The Brady Bunch were originally on the air, many people thought they were funny programs. But when we viewed them in class, many of you didn't laugh at all. Why do you think the shows aren't funny to you? Do you think sitcoms that are popular now will still be funny in 20 years?

To many people, the shows today seem funnier than they were years ago. Maybe, just maybe cause some of the stuff seen on old shows has been done over and over through many other shows. They just change a few parts here and there but at the end it's almost the same thing. Also the problems or conflicts that were dealt with in the sitcoms back then weren't really that serious compared to the shows today, so they used different ways to make us laugh. But some shows today are changing adding more sexual humor and insults but in 20 years those shows won't be funny enough. They will want more and more, and the worst thing is that they will be watching the same thing we are seeing just with a different face on it.

Ezekiel

As a culminating production project, the kids produced their own "sit-drams," in which they attempted to write and act out family situations that hit closer to home. I divided students into groups of three or four, and each team scripted their own scene. Our pieced-together set included a colorful backdrop Dave Coronado's art classes painted for us, and with the addition of a couch from the principal's office, an upholstered chair donated by a teacher, and an area rug dragged in by an eighth grader, we had ourselves a living room. The kids' scenes dealt with issues such as trust and honesty, teen pregnancy, divorce, and the double standard parents often had for male and female children. Since sitcoms always neatly tie things up at the show's end, the students made a conscious effort not to do that with their scripts. They tried instead to deal with the conflicts in credible ways that rang true to their own experiences.

As the semester went on, we talked quite a bit more about representation on television—how some groups of people are overrepresented, while others hardly show up at all. We also examined how minorities are shown many times in stereotypical roles or situations. African-Americans, though more visible on TV than in years past, are still showing up primarily in dippy comedies that are at best caricatures of contemporary black life. Mexicans and other minority ethnic groups are seldom shown in any dramatic context outside the occasional drug dealer or criminal. And women continue to be offered a more limited range of roles than their male counterparts.

As a final project, I invited the eighth graders to write a letter to the network of their choice that addressed these issues. It wasn't a requirement, but I told them if they felt strongly about it, they should let their voices be heard. Many chose to write to Fox Television, which geared many of its programs to teen viewers. Lalo Fernandez, a bright kid who had come to Chicago from a tiny town in central Mexico only 2 years before, wrote:

Fox, I really like your network. But I have one problem. My problem is that you have a stereotype about latinos. And that stereotype is negative. For example, in "COPS," the latinos and black are almost all the time the bad people. And the white people are the cops. And that's suppose to be a reality base program.

In our school we have a class of media studies. We make videos where we don't stereotype or leve nobody out. I think you can do the same thing that we do. Because in programs like "COPS" is where people get a bad image about other races. In a simple thing like this is where you can find possibles solutions for serious problems.

Lorena Hasan, whose family was among a handful of Palestinians who lived in Back of the Yards, also wrote to the head of programming at Fox. "My friends and I watch your network all the time," she wrote,

but every time we watch your comedy shows, we never see Mexicans or Arabians as the main characters. The main reason why this bothers me so much is because no one really knows what the Mexican and Arabian cultures are all about because they're always shown as the bad guys or made fun of. I'm not saying that your the only Network that does that, but you're one of the main Networks that everyone watches and maybe you can change a few things."

In closing, Lorena wrote, "I would appreciate it if you can answer my letter. Thank you." We never received any response from Fox.

ONE OF THE THINGS I have enjoyed most about teaching Media Studies is the freedom it provides. Anything that relates even tangentially to the mass media or communication is a potential topic of study. Since I have no textbooks or state guidelines for the class, I am not bound to present a certain amount of material, or even to cover particular areas of content. If a sudden current begins to pull my students in an unexpected direction, the course gives me the flexibility to flow with it.

One spring morning, the inseparable Veronica and Teri came in to class singing, "Don't go chasing waterfalls, please stick to the rivers and the lakes that you're used to . . ." I recognized the words from TLC's hit song "Waterfalls." The two girls had been singing it nonstop, it seemed, for the past several days. I joined in with them for the chorus's next line.

"You know that song?" Teri asked in surprise, apparently picturing me at home with an old Victrola, tapping my toe to the sounds of Glenn Miller's orchestra.

"I do have a radio," I answered sarcastically. "It's on every 5 minutes."

"We love that song," Veronica chirped.

"I noticed. You know what it's about?"

The girls looked at one another. "Uhhh . . . waterfalls?"

"Not quite," I said. "You two sing it every day. Have you never thought about what it is they're talking about?"

"I dunno," said Teri.

"We just like the music," added Veronica with a shrug of her shoulders.

I knew the feeling. As a seventh grader I had sung along with Rick James's ode to "Mary Jane" for months before a friend clued me in that it wasn't a girl Rick was singing about. "Tomorrow when you come in

here I want you to tell me what that song's about," I told the girls. "You already know all the words. Just go home and write them down and think about it."

The girls came bounding into my room the next morning before school, excitedly rattling off explications of the lyrics. It was the most enthusiastic response I'd gotten to a homework request in some time, and it wasn't even a formal assignment. Maybe I should try this with all the kids, I thought. Next to television, popular music was surely the medium they connected with most passionately. I remembered my brother Kirk doing a similar project a few years earlier during his tenure as a high school English teacher, and he'd said it was one of his students' favorites.

That night, I worked up an assignment sheet. I presented it to my students the next day. In my introduction, I talked about the "Waterfalls" episode and the fact that many people listen to music without giving much thought to a song's meaning. The purpose of the project, I told them, was *to really listen* to a song. What was the story, the message, the point? Was the song provocative, truthful, poetic, stupid? I told the kids they could choose any song—current or old, English or Spanish. They were to transcribe the lyrics of the song, word for word, and prepare a presentation in which they analyzed its meaning for the class.

"Any song?" asked Frankie.

"Any song," I said.

"What if it has some bad words in it?" Kids at Quincy didn't call them swear words, curse words, or "cuss words," like I had growing up in the South. They translated directly from the Spanish—*malas palabras*, bad words.

I thought about it for a second. I knew some of the guys listened to some pretty violent stuff, but I figured it would be good for them to reflect on what the songs meant—if anything—and to discuss them. "It's okay if there's some bad language," I said, "but you should make that a part of your analysis. Tell why those words are important to the song."

I told the kids to treat the analysis just as they would that for a poem or short story. They should discuss characters, conflict, symbolism, figurative language, moral, message, humor, and anything else that seemed important. They were to bring the song on tape or CD and type or neatly print a lyric sheet, making enough copies for the entire group.

I agonized over this last request. In some schools, in some neighborhoods, I wouldn't have had to give it a second thought. But at Quincy, in Back of the Yards, asking the kids to come up with 12 or 14 copies on their own was something I was hesitant to do. The xerox machine at the public library cost 15¢ a copy. For 14 copies, that was a little over \$2. It didn't seem like much money, but I couldn't be certain that all of them

could come up with it. While many had two working parents with steady, if low-paying, jobs, I had visited the homes of other kids whose apartments could only be described as squalid. I didn't want to cause these children any undue hardship or embarrassment. "It's your responsibility to get these copies made," I told the kids. "But if you think it's going to be a problem, see me about it. We'll work something out."

The day we were to begin the presentations, I got a message from Pam Cronin, a teacher down the hall, asking if I could come by her room. She needed to verify something with me. The message said it was urgent. My next class wasn't due for another 20 minutes, so I headed to Pam's room to see what was wrong. She came out in the hall carrying several wrinkled sheets of notebook paper. I could see Frankie's name at the top of one of the sheets.

"I just wanted to check this out with you," Pam said, her voice giving me no hint as to what was coming. "Frankie wanted me to make copies of these song lyrics for him. He said he needed them for your class, so I said I would. On my way down to the office, I started reading them, and I was just stunned. They're disgustingly violent, degrading to women—more than degrading. My sons listen to some pretty horrible stuff, but not like this. This is sick. Anyway, when I asked Frankie about it, he said you'd approved it, so I wanted to let you handle getting the copies made. I don't want to be responsible for it."

Pam handed me the papers and I quickly scanned the first few lines. Now I was stunned, and I don't consider myself a person who stuns easily. I couldn't believe Frankie had done this to me. The exact lyrics have since evaporated from my memory, but suffice it to say that the song's title was "Blow Job Betty" and it only got worse from there.

I felt betrayed and stupid. Sure, I had said any song was acceptable. Frankie had asked me straight out. *Any song?* Yes, Frankie, any song. But not this one. I never imagined anyone would be so bold or sneaky or just plain comatose to bring in something this overtly foul. I had been prepared for the harsh violence and braggadocio of gangsta rap songs like "Real Muthaphuckkin' G's," which someone would use later in the day, or the nihilistic rantings of the neo-punk band KMFDM. But this? Frankie had called me on the carpet and I had come out looking dumb. Twice. Once to Pam, who probably wondered what in the world I was teaching down there, and once to my classes, with whom I had to go back and change my libertarian tune: You know what guys? As it turns out, any song is *not* okay.

The analyses the kids presented over the next few days varied widely in their complexity and perceptiveness. Some were little more than summaries of the lyrics; others delved into the subtleties of the words with

great skill and care. Some chose obscure, metaphorical songs; others brought in Top 40 hits. Izzy, a kid who was notorious for asking questions he should have been able to answer himself, surprised me with his insightful dissection of Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise." Like "Waterfalls," it was a song that had been so overplayed on the radio that nearly every child in the building could recite it from memory. But they mouthed the words almost mechanically, in much the same way that they mumbled through the Pledge of Allegiance each morning. Other than vague generalities, most had no idea what the song was about. Izzy read from the last section of the lyrics: "They say I got to learn but nobody's here to teach me/If they can't understand it, how can they reach me/I guess they can't, I guess they won't, I guess they front/ That's why I know my life is outta luck."

"What he's saying right there," Izzy explained, "is that a lot of teachers, they can't really relate to what kids are going through 'cause they come from a different type of background. So he's saying how's he supposed to get his education if his teachers don't even understand him? He's saying 'they front,' like, you know, they're not really trying to teach him nothing."

About a third of the students brought in songs in Spanish. Watching them proudly play and discuss their music, it was almost as if they felt they were getting away with something that was against the rules; it was as if they'd been allowed to sneak homemade *tamales* and a glass of *horchata* into the lunchroom. Just seeing the work that had gone into getting the songs accurately transcribed was amazing. Chavo told me he had worked on the words to Bone, Thugs & Harmony's slick rap "Crossroads" for five solid hours one night, listening to a line at a time, stopping the tape to rewind, then playing it again, over and over and over. The lyric sheet he turned in was three pages, typed, complete with numbered verses and choruses.

One of the kids who I'd thought might not have the cash to get copies of his lyrics made was Miguel Salinas. He had walked around school practically blind for 2 years because his parents, neither of whom were legal residents, had little money and no insurance, and Miguel was too embarrassed—or too proud—to ask for help. Finally, one of his teachers noticed him straining to see the board and offered to take him to an optician. A week later, Miguel was wearing a pair of prescription glasses, and his school performance, not surprisingly, almost immediately improved.

Miguel hadn't taken me up on my offer of assistance with getting copies made, so I half-expected him not to do the assignment. Nonetheless, he came in on his assigned day ready to roll. He passed out copies of the lyrics for his chosen song, a Spanish *banda* tune from his home state

of Guerrero, and handed me his original handwritten version. While the song was playing, I noticed that the kid next to me also had a copy that was done in blue ink. I got up and circled the table, peering over the shoulders of each student. Blue ink all the way around. Miguel had done all 14 copies by hand.

Frankie didn't do a presentation. I told him he couldn't play the song he had chosen because it was offensive to Ms. Cronin, it was offensive to me, and it probably would have been offensive to at least some of his classmates. Instead, I told him I'd like the two of us to sit down together, listen to the song, and discuss his fascination with it. I thought it was important to have Frankie think about the misogyny in the lyrics, and perhaps get him to talk about his views on women and sex. There seemed at least a possibility that there was something deeper at work; a demon of some sort that was growing unchecked inside him. So how about if we talk it over, I had asked. Cool, he'd said. Any time.

My intentions were good. I intended to follow through. I kept telling myself, "Tomorrow. I'll meet with Frankie tomorrow." But it never happened. The year rolled on, days into weeks into months, and there was always something else that seemed more pressing, another kid or another responsibility that needed tending to first. *I'll get to it*, I thought. *One of these days I'll just pull him out of class and we'll talk.* But then June came and Frankie was gone.

I still think about Frankie on occasion. I ride through Back of the Yards sometimes thinking maybe I'll see him, and that if I do, maybe I'll jump out of the car and we'll hold class right there, breaking down the song lyrics on the concrete sidewalk. But I haven't seen him around. Maybe he's moved. Maybe—who knows? Meanwhile, time just keeps moving on. It's a teachable moment that got away, just one of many that I've knowingly let slip through my fingers.

THERE ARE TIMES when I envy those teachers who always seem to be so sure they are doing the right thing with their students. It is rarely that way for me. No matter what I do, I am hounded by unanswered questions, nagging uncertainties, lingering doubts. I believe in the media studies course and in the opportunities it gives students. Putting the video equipment in their hands gives them a voice, a way to see themselves and tell their stories. Learning to view TV and other media more critically helps combat feelings of powerlessness and marginalization. It provokes them to use their brains, to think.

But even if they are getting these things—and not all of them are—what are they not getting? How about those basics, the reading and the writing? Sure, kids read and write in my class, but not intensively. Not

every day. Time is short (I only have them for a quarter or a semester), and we're doing too many other things. We're rehearsing scripts, we're taping projects, we're deconstructing cartoons, we're discussing homophobia. While I think most kids come out of Media Studies with a better understanding of mass communication and its uses and abuses, I can't honestly say they leave as better communicators. Some do. Some don't.

I am aware, as Lisa Delpit states so forcefully in *Other People's Children*, that if African-American and Latino children are to have a chance at success in this society, they must be taught skills that will serve those ends. They must be taught to construct sentences, to compute numbers, to read and comprehend. Anything short of this is cheating them. But I cringe at news reports and studies that suggest that all urban kids really need is to get back to basics. Because what often seems to accompany this idea is a belief that the basics are all poor black and Spanish-speaking children are capable of learning. That we have to endlessly drill them with exercises and worksheets and tests that keep them busy but leave no time for doing or making things, no space for real thought.

Still, I often wonder if what I'm teaching the kids in my class is making any difference, or if it's being carried over into their real-life media encounters. Sometimes it seems like a lost cause. In the spring of the year when Paloma and her class studied talk shows, I arranged a field trip for two dozen eighth graders to attend a taping of the *Jerry Springer* show. As usual, I had mixed feelings about it. I had first thought that a visit to the show might be the best way to expose its excesses to the kids. After thinking it over, though, I had changed my mind, deciding that seeing Springer, who many of them considered a celebrity, might cloud their judgment and prevent them from making an unbiased analysis of their visit. But the kids wouldn't let the idea die. Even after they had left my class, they kept bugging me about it. Finally, I relented. I ordered tickets, reserved a bus, and photocopied permission slips. I didn't tell the kids, but secretly I was hoping for the sleaziest, most moronic and mean-spirited gabfest ever. I was out to prove a point.

But it was not to be. Jerry's guests were two kids with HIV, and the entire show was dedicated to making the kids' dreams come true. Dallas Cowboys running back Emmitt Smith appeared in a special video, wishing the kids well in their fight. Razor Ramon, a so-called professional wrestler I'd never even heard of but whom many of my students idolized, made a personal appearance. And to top it all off, the popular rap group Naughty by Nature came out to perform a rousing rendition of their hit "Hip Hop Hooray."

It wasn't as if there was nothing there to deconstruct. The show was still manipulative and calculated and shallow. But much of that got buried

underneath the glamorous stars, the endless smiles, the applause, the bright lights. The kids with HIV seemed happy. Jerry looked like a hero. The entire audience was dancing in the aisles. As the credits for the program began to roll, my students and I, hands raised in the air, followed the floor director's lead and swayed back and forth to the hip-hop beat. Zombies of a different sort. Chalk up one more for the opposition.

Paloma

Paloma sits alone at the front of the sanctuary, a bouquet of artificial flowers in her lap, her chair only a few feet away from the priest's raised lectern. Behind her, close to 70 people, nearly all of whom are part of her extended family, are gathered in the pews of St. Peter's, a small Catholic church not far from Quincy School. It is Paloma's 15th birthday—her *quinceañera*, as it's known among Mexicans and other Latinos. It is the day, according to Mexican Catholic tradition, when a young woman's coming of age is to be recognized and celebrated.

The first time I attended a *quinceañera* for a former student, I had been taken aback by the elegance and expense of it all. I hadn't known what to expect. Nothing in my upbringing had prepared me for it. Like Paloma, the girl of honor that day was decked out in what looked to me like an elaborate wedding dress, and was escorted down the church aisle by five young men in matching tuxedos, her *chambelanes*. Later, following a catered buffet dinner at a far South Side banquet hall, she and the *chambelanes* danced a highly choreographed waltz to inaugurate the cotillion, or formal ball, that concluded the day's festivities. As I watched, I couldn't help thinking about how much money the whole thing must have cost the girl's mother, who otherwise barely eked out a modest living. I imagined that every person in her family had been made to scrimp and sacrifice for months just to afford it.

Money isn't quite so tight for Paloma's parents, who co-manage a small but successful construction business that her father started several years back. They listen from the front pew as Father Alberto, the diminutive but animated young priest, coincidentally recounts the Biblical parable of the two house builders—one who built his house on rock, and the other who constructed his on sand.

"So where are you going to build your house?" questions Father Alberto in a call-and-response style that seems to catch many in the crowd by surprise.

"On the rock!" scattered voices answer back.

"¿Dónde?"

"¿En la roca!"

Holler If You Hear Me
The Education of a Teacher
and His Students

GREGORY MICHIE

FOREWORD BY

SANDRA CISNEROS

SERIES FOREWORD BY

WILLIAM AYERS AND THERESE QUINN



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To my best and most patient teachers, my parents,
Mary Carol and George Michie,
whose concern for other people's children
is surpassed only by their love for their own

To the memory of five remarkable educators

Bobbie Goodrum

Joe Humphrey

John Nicholls

Frank Ponce

Shirley Traback

And to the memory of

Carlos Alvidrez

Lena Ayesh

Kenneth Cruz

Matthew Flynn

Gabriel Godinez

Delvon Harris

Jose "Beto" Montelongo

Robert Owens

Erika Quintero

Adriana Rodriguez

Ten who died too young.