

Voices in the Classroom



Experiment on 96th Street

THE challenge was tough and direct: "Don't tell me you can start a private school that's 30 per cent Negro and get one single middle class WASP to go to it." The response was equally direct. It is called the Manhattan Country School: Nearly a third of its children are from Spanish or Negro Harlem and are receiving full scholarships; the rest are the sons and daughters of the middle class, whose parents pay up to \$1,450 a year for the privilege.

Manhattan Country School is private, but in the way that it is integrated—racially, economically, culturally—and in its educational promise, it represents what the public school in America was ideally supposed to be but rarely managed. The school does not preach integrated education or human relations, but the diversity of backgrounds of its pupils is one of its great curricular assets. Since the school, which now has 102 pupils, is only in its second year, it is too early to examine achievement scores or any of the formal tests of academic "success," but if morale and tone are any indication, Manhattan Country is on its way. Of the sixty-six children who started in the school in the fall of 1966, one was withdrawn by his parents, two moved away, and sixty-three are still enrolled.

Manhattan Country School is the product of what now seems like an old-fashioned commitment to integration and social action and a fundamental interest in better education. Its director and one of the original organizers of the venture is Augustus Trowbridge, a thirty-three-year-old graduate of Brown who had been teaching in a prestige private school and brought some of its faculty with him. Trowbridge considers Manhattan Country not as a private enclave but as a potential model for what public education ought to be.

The school opened with the premise that "to assume that children's similarities are more important than their differences ignores the value of learning from variety. . . . They become reliable when they are relied upon: They learn best when what they are doing is relevant and when the framework of their learning demands a measure of independence." The school now runs from the nursery level through the fifth grade and will ultimately go through the eighth grade. Much of its pedagogy is pure

John Dewey but with a minimum of ideology or preaching. Modern mathematics and the original poetry of ten-year-olds are equally honored and encouraged. There is art and music, but there is also a solid dose of disciplinary rigor. "Much of education," said Trowbridge, "is a matter of exposure." And with the variety of backgrounds in Manhattan Country School, the exposure comes in all forms, including an unsponsored trip to the bathroom by a group of five-year-olds eager to discover whether their Negro classmates are black all over.

The school sends reports to parents, but it gives no grades and encourages collaboration rather than competition among children. Recently, when a group of pupils were given a standardized achievement test, work stopped while the children watched, in perfect silence, the forty-minute mating ritual of a pair of doves that had been given the school. The doves provided not only a measure of what is these days called sex education but also the basis for considerable student poetry and prose. (They may even have provided a lesson in manners: "When doves mate, the female pretends that she doesn't care, but she's really interested in him.")

Trowbridge's faculty includes a number of highly competent master teachers as well as a group of assistant teachers, many of whom are students at New York

colleges. (There are seventeen staff members for 102 pupils; nonetheless the school's budget is only moderately higher per pupil than that of some of the better financed public schools.) On the staff, teaching two days a week, is Richard Lewis, a writer and a collector of children's poetry, who stimulates delightful prose and verse even from those described as "nonverbal." Playing chords on the piano, Lewis asks children to mime the growth of a tree, a man describing a fish, a fish describing a man, a man seeing himself for the first time in a mirror or a pool. The mime relies on the children's imaginations: Each acts the part as he sees it. Toward the end of the exercise, the mime stops and the children begin to write, to verbalize what they have just been trying to do without words.

When the gods are angry they put a skin over the sky.

I am a I am a I am a I really do not know.

I am a person that is not any other living soul or plant.

I am myself.

No one can say whether Manhattan Country School is a portent of the future. At this point the school, located in a four-story building that used to be the Nippon Club, is still trying to achieve financial security. Grants from the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and other sources have helped meet expenses not covered by tuition. Nonetheless, the school is devoting a full 30 per cent of its budget to scholarships, a commitment that Trowbridge feels is as crucial as a balanced budget.

At the same time, for Trowbridge and his staff, the essential issues are not financial but cultural and educational: How does the school remain "connected up" with ghetto parents who often have little time for conversations about the mating habits of doves or the definition of mathematical coordinates? How does one define disciplinary bounds for children accustomed to physical rather than verbal reprimands? How does one bring disadvantaged children into the world without forcing them to deny their families and everything that they once were? Preston Wilcox, who has worked extensively with Negro community groups and who is a trustee of the school, told Trowbridge that whatever is done in helping children find themselves may be painful. "But there is only one way out of the ghetto, and that's out." No one can be certain that the successes will be overwhelming, but given the attitudes—the tough-minded idealism of the Manhattan Country School staff—the odds seem to be in the school's favor. That alone makes the place worth watching and worth supporting. —PETER SCHIRAC.

