

# Little Acorns, Big Oaks

*The head start provided by this grade 1 teacher lasted a lifetime.*

By Judith Rich Harris

“Miss A” was what she was called in an article about her by educator Eigil Pedersen and his colleagues, published in the *Harvard Educational Review*, in 1978.

She was a grade 1 teacher in the Montreal primary school Pedersen attended in the 1940s – an old school of the old school, built like a fortress, its windows reinforced with iron bars.

An inner-city school surrounded by tenements and attended by the children of poor people and immigrants: two-thirds white, one-third black. A school in which fights and behaviour problems were rampant and were punished with the strap. There were two or three strappings a day. The good old days, huh?

Eigil Pedersen was one of the tiny minority of the school’s alumni who made good. He graduated from high school and went on to college, and in the 1950s he returned to the school as a teacher.

During the years he taught there, he began to look into the school records for an explanation of why such a large proportion of the school’s students never finished high school. But something else he found in the records interested him so much that he abandoned his original research goal and concentrated instead on studying Miss A’s effect on the students in her grade one classes.

Miss A, Pedersen discovered, had had an extraordinary effect on her students. The fact that they made good grades in her class didn’t prove anything – perhaps she was an easy marker – but Pedersen noticed that Miss A’s students, on the average, made better grades the next year too, even though they were split up among several grade 2 teachers.

Following them through their school careers, Pedersen discovered that the academic superiority of Miss A’s kids was still detectable in grade 7. Intrigued, he extended his investigation to the world outside the school.

He traced some of its alumni and interviewed them. He found that Miss A’s ex-students were doing better in their adult lives than those who had been taught by other grade 1 teachers. In terms of upward mobility, they had climbed higher than their schoolmates.

Judging by what her ex-students told Pedersen, Miss A is a strong candidate for sainthood. She never lost her temper. She would stay after school to help any of her students who were having trouble – they came from a variety of backgrounds, but every last one of them learned to read. She would share her lunch with kids whose parents had forgotten (or couldn’t afford) to provide them with one. She remembered their names 20 years after they left her classroom.

In a textbook I wrote several years ago, I attributed Miss A’s long-lasting effect to the head start she gave her students in grade 1. But head starts provided by programs like Head Start tend to peter out over time, even if they produce dramatic improvements in the short run. Why didn’t the Miss A effect peter out?

Here is a clue. Not one of Miss A’s former students failed to correctly name her as their grade 1 teacher when Pedersen interviewed them. But four people who *hadn’t* been in her class incorrectly named her as their grade 1 teacher. “Wishful thinking,” Pedersen called it.

Behind the barred windows of that old school, among the tenement kids who attended it, there was a group of motivated learners who thought of themselves as “Miss A’s kids”, even though some of them had never set foot in her classroom. Perhaps Pedersen himself was part of that group. Perhaps that is how he managed to become one of the school’s most successful alumni, despite the fact that his grade 1 teacher was Miss B.

*(Adapted with permission from The Nurture Assumption)*

A truly gifted teacher can prevent a classroom of diverse students from falling apart into separate groups and can turn the entire class into an *us* – an *us* that sees itself as scholars. An *us* that sees itself as capable and hard-working.

Jaime Escalante, an immigrant from Bolivia who taught calculus to a bunch of Mexican-American kids in an East Angeles high school was a teacher of this sort. A biographer described Escalante’s effect on his students this way: he made his students feel that they were “part of a brave corps on a secret, impossible mission”.

Another gifted leader is Jocelyn Rodriguez, a teacher at a middle school in the Bronx. Rodriguez manages to form the students in her classes – mostly black and Hispanic – into a close-knit community. Each class thinks up a name for its community, designs a flag, and composes an anthem.

One of the things that characterize these exceptional classrooms is the attitude the students adopt toward the slower learners among them. Instead of making fun of them, they cheer them on. There was a boy with reading problems in one of Rodriguez’s classes and, when he started making progress, the whole class celebrated.

You can see the same sort of thing in descriptions of schools in Asian countries – in Japan, for instance. Kids are criticized by their classmates for misbehaving and cheered for doing well. Misbehaviour by one child is seen as a blot upon the entire class; one child’s improvement is seen as a triumph for everyone.

I think that their we’re-all-in-this-togetherness is the chief reason why Asian kids are ahead in many school subjects. With no group in the classroom adopting an anti-school, anti-intellectual attitude – with every kid working at maximum capacity – the teacher can go vrooming ahead.