

A Lively Classroom —

THE READING REFORM FOUNDATION WAY

TWENTY-ONE STUDENTS FILE INTO A KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM at Community School 134 in the Bronx in New York City. They walk two by two. They take off their coats and stow them away in cubbies built into a large walk-in closet. They are dressed identically, or nearly so, in uniforms of light blue shirts and dark blue pants and skirts. A few of the students wear clothing that approximates the school uniform, substituted with a t-shirt and blue jeans. All the students find their seats quickly at three rows of small, separated tables that face the chalkboard. Behind each, two students sit facing front with an additional student or two sitting at each end. There is a sheet of paper in front of each student as well as a sharpened pencil. They prepare to get started. This all happens silently and quickly. Within thirty seconds the students, who had been outside at recess playing minutes earlier, have settled down to work.

The classroom itself is large and filled with sunlight on a chilly winter day. An entire wall of windows on the south side of the room floods the space with brightness. The walls are papered with pictures and samples of writing that are displayed on every available vertical surface. The ceiling is high, perhaps twenty feet above the students.

The blackboard that stretches the width of the room is so completely covered in learning materials that its slate surface is entirely hidden. Posters display coins and currency, a large face of a clock with moveable hands, and illustrations from books. Letters of the alphabet and numbers scroll across the top of the board. There are a few chairs for adult visitors that look surprisingly large relative to the Lilliputian scale of the rest of the room. This is kindergarten.

A lovely woman, perhaps in her early thirties, steps confidently in front of the classroom. She is Mrs. Karen Cintron, and she launches into the lesson like a racehorse out of the starting gate. First is the alphabet, which they chant, alternating two letters at a time, between teacher and students, “A, B.” “C, D.” “E, F,” and so on, until they reach the end. It is breathlessly fast and loud. The students hear Mrs. Cintron say, “Good,” and they move instantly to the next task, a listing of all the vowels and the possible sounds that each makes. The students practically shout the responses in a choral unison. “Good,” says Mrs. Cintron.

Oral blending is next. The teacher says two sounds, “f,” “a,” and the students blend these sounds together. She says ten combinations of sounds and says, “Good.” She points to the list of sight words, which students say in unison. For the last few words she asks the students for sentences with those words. She points to the suffix chart and the children call out, “suffix -s means more than one, suffix -ing means happening now.”

The teacher picks up a thick stack of index cards and holds them at chest level, and she rotates the cards one by one to the end of the stack. Each card has a picture and a letter or a combination of letters, which the students sound out, again, at breakneck speed. The cards, three dozen or so, pass by quickly. At each, the students say the picture name and the sound on the card. The first cards are straightforward: the letter *r* invokes the class, “Rrrrrr.” The letter *b* triggers an explosive sound, “Buh.” But the sounds become increasingly more complex. The class distinguishes clearly between the sounds of *ch* and *sh*, for

example, and also when *ai* and *ay* are used (rain/ai, tray/ay).

When Mrs. Cintron gets to the card, *ay*, the students say “*tray/ay*”. And so it goes as she propels her way through the pile of picture cards, then letter cards. As they proceed, Mrs. Cintron repeats some of the sounds that aren’t perfected yet by the group, and the students hone in on exact pronunciation. Everyone in the class is participating. The entire stack of cards is dispatched in minutes.

Now Mrs. Cintron is at the front of the room and begins to write the word *clap* for visual blending. The teacher writes on a dotted-line wipe-off board. As she writes, the students sound out each letter deliberately and carefully. She asks a student, Jonathan, to sound it out. “*c*,” “*llll*,” “*a*,” “*pppp*,” then, “*cl*,” “*claaa*,” and finally, “*claaaap*,” “*clap*.” As he reads the word, some of the students have a surprised look on their faces—not all of the students; just a few—as if a little light has gone on in their heads, an “Oh, I get it.”

Mrs. Sandra Gittens, a Reading Reform Foundation consultant, takes over part of the lesson and announces that the class will be learning a new way to spell the sound *c* as in *ck*. She teaches them how to write the letters *ck*. They repeat the sound exactly, and over the next few minutes, they practice reading the sound as it occurs in different words. On the board, with solid and broken lines across it, she writes the letter *c*, then the letter *k*.

They raise their arms in the air, as if they are holding an imaginary pencil. Together they draw the letters in space very slowly. First the *c*, with an even curve. “Again,” the teacher says, “Again.” They move on to the *k*. The students’ little arms are stretched as high as they will go to begin. In the air they draw a long, vertical line and then the teacher instructs them precisely where to connect the slanted lines of the *k*. “Again. Again.” Then they are asked to pick up their pencils, and they write the letters on paper. “If you made a mistake, cross it out and try again,” she says. The room is completely silent. The students are concentrating on their work.

They learn that *ck* can only be used after a single vowel, never at the beginning of a word. Mrs. Gittens writes the word *neck* on the board. She asks students to “code” it. First they break the word into sounds, “*nm*,” “*eb*,” “*ck*,” “*neck*.” She draws a line under the *ck* and reinforces the sound that they have been learning today. As the teacher sounds out other words, *rock*, *back*, and *sick*, the students sound them out for reading. They also spell words with *ck* onto their paper.

Vocabulary practice begins as the teacher says a word, “drum,” uses it in a sentence and calls on a student to spell each sound letter-by-letter as the class writes it. They do this quietly with a few words.

All of this happens rapidly. There is a formality to the lesson, and because of the speed of it, it feels something like a drill, but there is also compassion. When a student doesn’t seem to understand a concept, a teacher kneels down by her side and helps her. When another student seems distracted and his leg starts kicking the radiator compulsively, the mentor, Mrs. Gittens, who is working alongside Mrs. Cintron, places her hand on his shoulder for a second and he rejoins the lesson. A pencil falls to the ground, a student mispronounces a word, and a boy momentarily goes quiet as his classmates are reciting, but each rejoins the spirited lesson.

Papers and pencils are collected, and each student is given a little reading book. The name of the book is *Al*. Al is an alligator. The pace of the class and the atmosphere in the room change. Some of the formality dissipates, and in its place enters curiosity. “Who wants to read?” the teacher asks, and the hands shoot up. In an instant, every child’s hand is waving excitedly. Each page has a half dozen or so words on it. As a student is called upon, he reads aloud, his finger touching the words on the page as he proceeds. “Mr. Joseph,” “Miss Mariah,” the teacher selects students. As they read the story about an alligator that gets into quite a bit of trouble, a sort of Curious George with teeth, the class stops to analyze what is going on and what they understand. After a reader finishes a page, the teacher repeats aloud what

the child has read. If a word requires extra attention, the child who is reading sounds it out. Finally, the book is finished. Every student has had at least one chance to read aloud—Jonathan, Gabriel, Rafael, Unique, Joseph, Reginald, Tynique, Steven, Jacob, Mariah, Courtney, Xavier, Hailey, Jared, Dielsa, Daisy, and the others, including one little boy whose name is Knowledge. Together they discuss the characters and the ideas that they discovered in the story. And then, as abruptly as it began, the class time is over.

Reading Reform Foundation of New York is responsible for the teaching of that small class in the Bronx; in numerous other New York City schools in Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan, and in the Westchester County towns of Mt. Vernon and Port Chester. Mrs. Gittens is one of the Foundation's thirty-five mentors who travel to the schools twice each week. Currently 2,000 children per year benefit from Reading Reform-trained teachers. Seventy-eight teachers are receiving training now in 23 schools. There are 300 teachers taking Reading Reform courses.

Reading Reform Foundation goes into schools and works with teachers as mentors. To date, 30,000 students have been taught with Reading Reform Foundation's methodology, and 20,000 teachers have attended Reading Reform Foundation's annual conference and taken graduate-level courses. Almost 1,200 teachers have been part of the in-school teacher-training program.

Reading Reform Foundation's teaching consultants are mentors who have been trained to guide teachers of students K through 3 in some of the most challenging neighborhoods in New York and Westchester County. The mentors thoroughly train teachers in a program of reading. The mentor-consultants sit with the classroom teachers in twice-a-week teacher preparation periods, and together they map out the specifics of each lesson that will be taught. The mentors provide reading materials for the classroom, bringing paper and even sharpened pencils for the students. The consultants monitor

the children's progress, and at the end of the year Reading Reform Foundation sends a report to the principals of the schools. That is the work of the Foundation, and this volume about their efforts is a window into what they do, why they do it, and how it is accomplished. It is not an easy job, but they do it with passion.