

Inside...

McPhee Elementary School

Last week I spent a day at Clare McPhee Elementary School. I did not know what to expect, but it turned out to be the best day of my entire winter break.

McPhee is an older building near the Capitol which has more character than many newer schools. It maintains a sort of dignity in its permanence, observing the passage of each succeeding group of students with the concern of a new parent and the all-knowing serenity of an experienced grandparent.

With a pebble-filled playground and just noticeably dated furnishings, McPhee provides an air of isolation. For students and teachers alike, the building provides a haven from the rest of the world.

Each morning, McPhee welcomes 420 eager students. That eagerness is important; the children want to be here and thus find all the more wonder in their discoveries.

About half of the children arrive by bus. The rest are delivered by parents or walk from their homes with an innocent assuredness that only elementary school children know.

The students have been back almost two weeks since the winter break. They are full of energy but not out of control.

Things are orderly at McPhee. The schedule is tight, and the children are accompanied from class to class. Children participate in the order. This involvement fosters attention and contributes to an educational environment rather than an overbearing one.

My morning begins in the first grade classroom of Teena Fauble and Marcia Forch. On the walls are several posters bearing the Pledge of Allegiance and one with the class rules.

1. Use quiet voices. 2. Respect others. 3. Listen and follow directions.

I cannot help but think that the world might be a better place if more people were to follow such rules.

The children gather in a circle and take turns reading to the others, occasionally stumbling over a word. The entire circle giggles as one girl reads a Shel Silverstein poem, "The Dirtiest Man in the World."

Her young voice already bears a remarkable cadence, rising and falling while emphasizing the rhymes which describe this fellow who never bathes.

The next girl reads a bit more slowly, but keeps everyone's attention. Later in the morning, she sits next to me with her friend while they read to themselves.

Time and again, she asks how to pronounce this or that word, and we sound each word out and laugh at the illustrations together. When it's time to line up and go to another classroom, she asks me to

tie her shoes.

"Don't you know how?"

"Yes, but I want you to."

These children are remarkable, each with his or her own surprises. One of the first grade boys is wearing a black, Harley T-shirt. He is anxious to answer questions, and other children come to him for help.

While helping a friend write a letter, he jumps up and hurries to a bookshelf, looking for a particular story. "Okay, here it is!" he exclaims as he returns with the book.

The misplaced word located, he resumes work on the letter.

"You're supposed to write on the line," one girl at his table chides.

The children are using thick pencils without erasers to write to



The Three Bears, who were kind enough to respond to the class' previous letter. They sit in groups of four at tables little higher than my knees, hard at work.

"Nuh-uh, it's P-L-A-Y," corrects one girl.

A boy wearing Adidas hightops a bit prematurely asks which way a "q" goes. After some discussion, the group consults a wall chart of the alphabet.

After the children have left the room, I sift through their letters, written in shaky scrawls with haphazard placement of capitals on thickly-lined paper.

One tells Goldilocks that she had no business going into the bears' house in the first place. Another writes, "Dear Georg: If Goldilocks ate your porridge then what did you eat?"

First grade teachers must be blessed with extraordinary patience. They encourage, direct, keep order and provoke thought. All the while, dozens of youngsters clamor for attention.

The teachers are crafty, asking the children to show with fingers how many times such and such happened in the story. That way, everyone gets to give the answer while chaos is carefully avoided.

One of the teachers describes the cooperative learning and self-

esteem bulding that goes on. An individual approach is emphasized, and the children choose their own books.

Almost as important to learning as self-esteem is surely a full stomach. The cafeteria at McPhee, which doubles as a gym, is besieged by 420 students every day.

They eat in three shifts, two grades at a time. If it gets too noisy, the lights are dimmed until voices are lowered. They inevitably begin a gradual rise with the return of the lights.

Two second graders sit across from me. One wears her coat and guards her plastic lunch box with both arms, somehow managing to eat cheese and crackers and a fruit wrap without lowering her guard.

She is talkative and tells me about her classes and her family and then asks several questions. Her friend is quiet and mostly listens, but does so very carefully. Every inflection, every gesture of mine is noticed.

They both finish eating fairly quickly but stay inside as long as possible, "because it is too cold to go out for recess."

Most of the boys hurry through the meal and sit rigidly straight with arms stretched toward the basketball hoops above, waiting for a teacher's verbal permission before leaving the table and going out to the playground.

The older kids begin filing into the cafeteria. Budding concerns for appearance are apparent. This group dresses in layers and wears more expensive shoes.

"What grade are you in?"

"Fourth," three of them proudly say in unison.

They are quick to give their names and want to know when the paper will be out so they can show their parents.

"My parents won't care if you use my name," each of them claims.

Some of these kids are deceptively worldly, one telling me about the consequences of a relative's unexpected pregnancy or traveling to another state for surgery. She is happy to have a few days off and does not think of the pain or the cost.

Later, the sixth graders arrive, and traces of innocence are less frequent. Fashion is as important to these children as it is to university

students.

With the sixth graders come arguments with the monitors and the slamming of trays. There are scattered snickers when an adult voice is raised to demand quiet.

T-shirts from heavy metal concerts appear, as do skirts. The boys wear sweat pants and laugh about very different things than do their younger counterparts.

Most of them are busy with their meals, but a few talk with me for some time. Opinions of classes are similar among those next to me.

They discuss in great detail the travails of an English class.

"We have to read three books every month," one boy says.

Despite their growing maturity, the sixth graders are anxious to get out to the playground. They do not "play" like the younger children -- there is a big football game which must be finished before the next class.

The playground slowly fills as the cafeteria empties. Within 15 minutes, the cafeteria has been cleared, the tables folded up to the wall, and the floor cleaned.

Outside, the children gather by grade and gender. There are a handful of loners, but most are engaged in various games. Even the loners are not completely isolated, drifting among each other and looking comfortable in their solitude.

Some of the games have been played for years, others are unique to this playground -- playground inventions with endlessly changing rules.

The children returned to the building class by class. I remained in the empty playground and thought about the days of my childhood, realizing it was impossible to cram six years' worth of memories into the space of a day.

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