

Me Nobody Knows

Sandy Feldheim

1969

a review of

The Me Nobody Knows: Children's Voices from the Ghetto edited by Stephen M. Joseph. Avon Books, 1969, paperback, 95 cents.

“On a nice cold September morning, I got up and was afraid to go to school.”

—Linda O., age 13

Our public schools aren't educating most people whether in the inner cities or the suburbs. There is little learning going on—if learning means growth, understanding and increasing awareness of self and others.

In the suburbs, things aren't usually as bad as they are in the large cities. At least there are textbooks, however boring or outdated, audio-visual aids, a nice building, and some hope of gaining the financial rewards schools promise.

Creativity is still smothered and initiative and exploration are usually squelched. (Witness the students suspended from Seaholm High in Birmingham for printing an “unauthorized” paper.)

A radical educator, Herb Kohl, author of *36 Children*, a fantastic book, said that the classroom is a microcosm of our society.

To paraphrase Kohl: America preaches democracy but we are given a choice between Nixon and HHH. Lip service is paid to the Constitution as the blacks and the poor are discriminated against or ignored.

America says she stands for peace and human dignity, yet she is imperialistic and is always motivated by the desire for profit.

In the classroom as well, there is no democracy; students have to ask permission to speak, to throw away paper, and to go to the bathroom. They have very little, if any, choice over what they learn. And they are totally controlled by the teacher who has the power of the grade.

Schools mirror our society in another essential way. Our society is oppressive for everyone, but visibly oppressive for some and subtly oppressive for others.

People in the upper and middle classes aren't free; they're usually tied to meaningless jobs and forced to compete with their associates, friends and neighbors.

They must suppress immediate happiness for future goals. And, they must accept regimentation and conformity to obtain these goals.

For the blacks and the poor, our society is obviously oppressive. Public schools may be new and neat, but the pupils are being prepared for the roles our society needs by subtle manipulation and sometimes forceful pressure.

In inner-city schools, the facade is gone. Like our society, the schools openly ignore their students' needs.

Many teachers in junior high schools around Wayne State, that I substitute teach at, walk around with yardsticks and paddles. The English text is often an updated edition of the boring book I used ten years ago, or one just as irrelevant to the students, if there are books at all.

Our society treats the poor and blacks as an alien, hostile and inferior group, and so do most schools.

As I see it, a main fault with our schools and our society is authoritarianism, whether overt or covert. Authoritarianism is the educational philosophy practiced in most schools. It is the basis of the petty rules that separate teachers and students and interferes with real learning and creativity.

Without authoritarianism, without the petty disputes over gum chewing, margins, commas, silence and straight lines, teachers would have to respond to their students' needs.

They would have to stimulate learning, rather than spewing out facts and figures. They would have to create an atmosphere for real growth and insight to take place.

Fortunately, there are bright spots of hope where an environment for learning exists, or has existed in the past, and these can serve as a source of inspiration.

There are schools established by young, hip people, where the students can wear what they want, say what they feel, and learn what excites them—or refuse to learn at all.

There are isolated schools or individual classrooms where the atmosphere is charged with growth rather than hostility.

Nat Hentoff wrote of the courageous principal of P.S. 119 in Harlem, and what he accomplished, in *Our Children Are Dying*. Herb Kohl and John Hernendon (who wrote *The Way It's Spozed To Be*), both describe their accomplishments in their classrooms. John Holt described his observations in *How Children Fail* and *How Children Learn*.

And recently, another book illustrating the results of freedom and trust in the classrooms was published: *The Me Nobody Knows: Children's Voices From the Ghetto*, edited by Stephen M. Joseph. This is a compilation of poems, stories, paragraphs, letters, etc. by Harlem students ages 7 to 18. Nothing was included without the author's permission, unless he could not be found.

The depth of expression in *The Me Nobody Knows* is amazing:

rejoice children, little brother, he's dead.

why, that's the best thing that could happen to him

'member how dark he was, why, he'd never've gotten further than high school.

he couldn't pass like you do rodney.

so what, he was only two years old.

now he's gone.

there's more food to go round.

rats got to him in his crib and they had a feast.

now I can go back to school and play in the afternoon.

'cause I don't have to babysit.

don't have to pay no more doctor and clinic bills: can pay mr. goldberg all the back rent on the apartment.

maybe now he'll fix the falling plaster:

leaking toilet bowl, and give us a new stove and ice box.

yeah, brothers and sisters, I'm so glad little brother is dead.

he don't have to go through what we have.

— Clorox, age 17

I'll never be able to express myself that way on paper, unfortunately. Whether serious, ghastly or humorous, every word is meaningful and expressive.

Why Did Eve Give Adam a Piece of Her Apple

One day Eve came upon an apple. The apple was gleaming in the sun. She looked at it with big eyes. She ran all the way to where Adam was and said Adam come to see my apple. So they went. She said "Adam would you like a piece of my apple?" He said "No." "Adam, if you don't take a piece of my apple I won't give you a piece of myself."

— Unsigned, age 16

These pupils wrote without fear of being confronted by a teacher with a red pencil who concentrated on grammar rather than feelings. Many of the works presented contain spelling and grammatical errors. But, so what.

Like their teachers, I can't evaluate the works in *The Me Nobody Knows*, except to say that they are the result of the freedom to create and the right to be heard.

These students—often described as “culturally deprived” or “semi-literate”—have had the confidence and self-esteem to create, reinforced by supportive teachers. But, they still have the arduous battle with American society to fight. Will they win? We can only hope so.

Locked in the Outsides by Nellie Holloway, age 16

Here we go again, man,
I'm locked in the outsides of the white man's world
I hear them saying "We can work it out."
Yeah, they can work it out.
by giving us welfare and fixing the slums.
Of course, baby, how else
Listen to them laughing and declaring
"Give the niggers and spics some mondy."
"Give them a shack to live in
and they'll be alright."
But don't pull tight, kid, don't fool me
You! Boss man, you may
Give me a house and some bread
And I'll pretend I'm your perfect brother
(A long time ago, huh
Old times and all that)
Now I want my share of the deal.
You live in the nice Park Avenue house,
While I slave to keep you there,
You wear pearls and diamonds
And I, costume jewelry.
Like they say, "A man's got to walk someday."
So it might as well be now.
Mr. Charlie is scared in his Bostonios shoes
and GGG suit
Now he hears about NOW
He hears, "Black Power, Baby."
Yea, Yea Black Power, NOW.
Not tomorrow or Monday,
But now. You there, Mr. Yessir!
It's time to remember,
It's time to see just who you are messing with
Not your little pink lipped
Black faced slave,
but a man and a people who are going to win.
Who are going to have power.
So listen, Mr. White Man, listen good.
You may give me some money
And a new house
But a new house just don't make a new man.

fifth Estate

Sandy Feldheim
Me Nobody Knows
1969

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/75-march-20-april-2-1969/me-nobody-knows>
Fifth Estate #75, March 20-April 2, 1969

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net