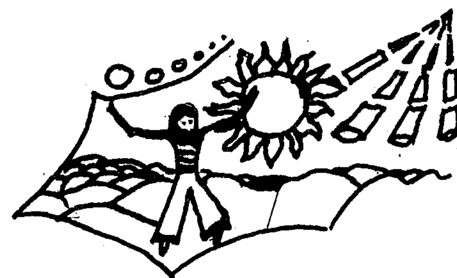

The Teacher as Student

David Nasaw

I first heard about the Elizabeth Cleaners Street School from my wife Barbara. She teaches at the Children's Community Workshop School, a free school for five- to twelve-year-olds on the Upper West Side of New York City. In the spring of 1970 she had heard that a group of parents and students were getting together to talk about setting up their own high school. I was at that time a graduate student at Columbia University. I had planned to spend the next year working on my doctoral dissertation in European history but was not overjoyed at the thought of being a full-time student again.

By the time I got around to attending a meeting of the high school, the group had taken over a storefront. I went to the first meeting they held in their new headquarters and volunteered my services. The students had taken on the task of hiring all the teachers; they arranged to interview me for a position some time the following week.

My interview was like no other. The kids were bored and tired from days and days of interviewing potential teachers. The word had spread rapidly that an alternate high school was starting, and teachers from all over the city had been appearing for interviews. Some of the excitement of interviewing teachers had evaporated by the time my turn came.

The interview was scheduled for two o'clock on a Sunday afternoon; at two-fifteen there were only two of us in the storefront, by two forty-five a few more students had arrived. I was asked what I thought my role as teacher in a free school would be, what courses I could teach, and if I had any experience. These, I believe, were the only questions ever directed to me. The rest of the time in the storefront was filled either by silence or my asking the students questions about themselves and their own ideas about education.

I didn't hear from the students for a couple of weeks. Then Lisa called to ask if I could come for a second interview. Because she was sick in bed, the interview was arranged for the following Sunday at her house. At the second interview I was asked where I got my boots, but not much else. We talked for quite a while about school and education, but I asked most of the questions and was quite blunt in my interrogation. I wanted to know how they were going to create an alternative education. Did they simply want a school where the teachers were more friendly and the courses more interesting? Or were they really interested in experimenting with alternative forms of learning? I could see that the students were a little uneasy with the range of my questions. The task of starting a school by themselves was enormous enough without the added pressure of a teacher prodding them to be truly free and experimental in their alternative school.

A couple of weeks later, the students happened to be using the mimeograph machine at my wife's school. She saw them and asked if they had chosen their teachers yet. They didn't know who she was, but answered anyway that they had, and that they were pretty sure I would be hired.

I wasn't notified of any decision. The following week I was invited to a general meeting of the entire school. During the meeting one of the parents asked the students if they had made any decisions about the teachers yet. Lisa said that they knew whom they wanted to hire but hadn't made any firm decisions yet. The parent asked when they planned to make these firm decisions. The kids didn't know. Someone reminded them that the decisions had to be made right then and there, because the next morning four of the students were leaving for summer camp and wouldn't be returning until September. The students agreed that the time had come; they huddled together for a couple of minutes and came back with their "firm" decision. I was now officially hired as a full-time paid employee of the Elizabeth Cleaners Street School.

The school now had a name, a storefront, about eight students, and three full-time teachers. (One of these was to drop out before school ever started.) We planned to open some time in September, but no date had been set. As a matter of fact, not much had been decided at all. We were all pretty vague about

the actual mechanics of setting up a free school. We were steadfastly committed to the principle of total student control, but no one knew exactly what that meant. I expected that much of my summer would be spent in long, involved meetings, preparation for the start of school in September.

It didn't work out that way. It was difficult to hold meetings at any time during the summer with half the students away and the other full-time teachers very often unavailable. When we did get together there were more urgent things to do than talk about starting school. The storefront was a disaster area: it needed painting, plastering, mopping, scrubbing. Every spare moment was spent trying to make the place look less dismal.

By September things were a little brighter inside the storefront, but I still had no idea what was going to happen on the first day of school.

Lisa didn't even want to have a "first day." She expected things to just slowly evolve to the point at which students assembled in the storefront would decide that it was time to begin classes. There wouldn't be any preplanned "opening date."

Unfortunately, we couldn't quite do things that way. We had never been completely accepted by the squatter's group that had taken over the tenement in which our storefront was located. Although the leadership of Operation Move-In, the squatter's organization, was friendly and helpful, there was some sentiment that a group of middle-class-white-hippie-looking high school students might not belong in a building occupied almost exclusively by Spanish-speaking poor people. In August, we had a minor crisis over this question. We were told that our storefront was going to be taken away from us because we weren't using it. Jeff explained that the storefront was empty because it was summer and school hadn't started yet, but his explanation wasn't good enough. We were later told by the O.M.I. leadership that the squatter who had threatened to "evict" us was acting on his own. They assured us that the storefront was ours to do with as we wished.

We were still uneasy. Our neighborhood opponent continued to ask when school was going to begin. The only way to quiet him and assert our right to the storefront was to put it to

good use and as soon as possible. We scheduled our first day of school for the Tuesday after Labor Day.

Before school could begin, we needed some sort of class schedule. The Thursday before Labor Day we all—teachers and students—got together in the storefront to plan for our first week. It was impossible—as it often is—to get everyone in the room to concentrate on the subject at hand. The meeting began in chaos, with everyone speaking at once. A couple of students looked to me and Elaine (the other full-time teacher) to bring things together, to control the discussion by calling on people who had their hands raised. We sat back quietly; it was, after all, a student-controlled school. When they felt the need to settle down to the business of making a schedule, they'd do it by themselves, without our prompting. The meeting continued to degenerate. One student became so upset with the group's apparent inability to bring the meeting to order that she walked out of the storefront. After about forty-five minutes of free-form discussion, someone suggested (loudly enough for all to hear) that the students make a list of all the courses they were interested in. Miriam and Lisa wrote down course names as all the kids shouted out the classes they wanted to take. When this list was complete, teachers, volunteer as well as paid, were assigned to courses and times were arranged for each class. By the end of the meeting we had put together a respectable-looking schedule.

Our first day, when it finally came around, was quite successful. The students got satisfaction from seeing their concept of student control put into practice. They had spent an entire school day with teachers they had chosen and in classes they had asked for. I suppose I was the only one who had misgivings about our first day. Something was missing from our "alternative." My class had been a success, but only because I had followed the time-tested pattern of lecturing on an interesting subject and providing openings for my students to participate in class discussion.

I wanted the students to exert more control over what happened within each class. Their concept of student control included choosing teachers and courses; it did not extend to the structure of the class itself. What happened within each class was the teacher's responsibility, not the students'. Of course, if

a teacher proved to be incompetent—in their terms—the students could fire him; and it was the students' right and responsibility to make suggestions to their teachers about the way courses should be run. In actual practice, however, the students were quite willing to sit back and passively accept whatever the teacher offered as long as it was "interesting" and there was room for student participation. I learned how to adjust my classes to this pattern the first few days of school. I was considered a good teacher and my classes were fairly well attended.

The Cuba class was probably the most popular one I taught. All the students had wanted a class on Cuba, and although at that time I knew next to nothing about it, I agreed to teach the course. I spent a lot of time in September reading about Cuba and preparing lectures on a variety of subjects: from the Spanish-American War to the Cuban economy. I invited people who had been to Cuba to come talk to the class and arranged for us to see several movies made in Cuba, by both Cubans and Americans.

By November the Cuba class had become a fixed part of our schedule and, for some of the students, a high point in the week. I was still unhappy. Every Wednesday morning I would walk into the storefront and talk about Cuba for a couple of hours. The students merely responded to what I told them. They had been doing no reading and had no information of their own to offer. I was tired of "lecturing," of being a simple dispenser of information. I told the class that I was discontinuing my Cuba lectures until they were prepared to run class discussions by themselves. I gave them a whole list of books and articles they could read and suggested that they draw up discussion questions from their reading for the following Wednesday class.

For a couple of weeks nothing happened in the time period set aside for Cuba class. The students were unwilling to gather their own information or run their own discussions. They insisted that they were not yet ready to dispense with "teachers." They wanted me to continue giving my class as I had in the past. I eventually gave in to their demands. I had paradoxically betrayed my commitment to student control by trying to force the students to implement my own ideas on student control. If I really believed in the principle, I had to act on that belief and follow student instructions even when I dis-

agreed with them. I had the right—and perhaps the responsibility—to tell them why I was unhappy with the way class was being run, but the final decision on class format was theirs.

I continued, however, to place one restriction on the students' freedom to use me as they wished. I did not want to become simply an entertainer, someone who fills up time. There had been moments in which I felt that the kids were looking to me to alleviate their boredom, to subdue their restlessness. I was happy to teach whatever they wanted, to take them on trips, to lead discussions, but I refused to be a full-time student activities director. It was their responsibility—and theirs alone—to structure their day or leave it unstructured if they wanted. I couldn't make these decisions for them. In fact, I felt that I shouldn't even participate in the decision-making process. My role in the storefront was to teach the courses the students wanted—no more, no less. The school had been founded on the theory that the students by themselves were capable of making all decisions relevant to their own educations. In practice, however, I sensed their hesitancy to take complete control of their school. They welcomed advice, suggestions, guidance from their teachers. When I realized that my "opinion"—as a teacher—had more weight than the student members of the school community, I refrained from giving it. I would not allow my authority as an adult to interfere with the students working out their own solutions to the daily problems that arose in the storefront.

I tried to refrain from giving advice on social as well as education matters. My assumption was always that the kids could work things out better by themselves, without my involvement in any way. I resisted the temptation to intervene when the younger boys began to engage in verbal assaults on one another and stayed away when a "romantic triangle" with complications that extended to nearly every student in the school vibrated through the storefront early in the year. After the episode with the Cuba class I also refrained from directly or indirectly imposing my notions of "free" education on the students. I continued to have reservations about an education centered totally around teacher-directed classes, but as long as the students were satisfied with this way of running their school, I kept quiet.

Until April, education at Elizabeth Cleaners consisted of scheduled classes taught by adults. Most of the classes had

voluntary reading assignments, though not many of the students did them. After a couple of weeks of trying to get my class to read something, I gave up and simply prepared lecture-type presentations that required no prior reading on the students' part. Some students, of course, did a lot of reading on their own. Lisa and Miriam, for example, read two or three of the books I suggested for the Surrealism class.

Each course lasted only as long as the students wanted. We were free to discontinue a course or end a class session whenever interest had waned. We didn't have to wait for semesters to end or bells to ring to stop doing something we no longer wanted to do. Marxism class met all year long. Urban renewal, on the other hand, stopped meeting just before Christmas. Sometimes an "exhausted" class would lead into another. Cuba class initiated interest in a Latin American history class. Surrealism fed right into classes on Freud and European history.

As spring approached, the politics of the storefront survival intensified. We had tried all year to "recruit" Spanish-speaking students and teachers, but failed. Probably because, as one of the neighborhood kids put it, "This is a great school. We'd come here if you could get us jobs." He attended a city vocational high school, one which told its students a diploma was their passport to a good job. In any case, by spring, we were still not ethnically or socio-economically representative of the immediate area in which the school was located. One faction of the Spanish-speaking community did not want a non-Spanish-speaking school in their midst. They began maneuvering to "evict" us. We might have rallied support in the neighborhood and fought to keep our storefront, but this would have led to the division and weakening of the entire squatter movement. When the group finally asked us to leave and offered us a new storefront in another location we agreed.

Boyle's Bar and Grill had been vacant for over eight years and was almost unusable when we moved in; no heat, no electricity, no bathrooms. In the old storefront, when kids didn't want to be in a class they could go to the back and do whatever they wanted without disturbing the class. In Boyle's there was no room to hangout. If you didn't want to be in a class you either had to sit quietly or leave the storefront altogether. As a result, the "school" became more a "classroom" than pre-

viously. People who didn't want to attend a class went off in a thousand directions: home, to the Pizza Parlour, to Broadway, to other storefronts. It was difficult to keep track of all the students and bring everyone together when that was necessary.

Classes went on in the new storefront, though a little more irregularly. Fewer students appeared for the ten o'clock class, and sessions were often curtailed because of the cold in the storefront. The coming of spring alleviated the latter problem but brought a new one. No one felt like sitting around in a devastated storefront when the weather was beautiful outside. It became more and more difficult to predict how many students would appear for any given class.

When classes were held, however, they were more often than not successful. Jack Litewka began to teach a creative writing class which all the kids enjoyed. Jerry Graham's media class and Richard's religion class met regularly, with active student participation. My psychology class seemed to be going well, and a new class on medieval epics, taught by Jane Kinzler (who had replaced Elaine), attracted a lot of students. Yet no matter how successful these and other classes were, our "good days" came fewer and farther apart.

Around this time, we received the contract to write our book. I noticed in myself a certain lack of enthusiasm to sit down and write the articles I had promised. The kids didn't feel much like writing either. Part of this was of course natural "laziness," but we were also hesitant to write about Elizabeth Cleaners at a time when things seemed to be coming apart—if ever so slightly.

After a particularly disappointing day in the beginning of April, a day in which only half the students had attended the scheduled classes, I called up Peter to find out why he hadn't come to school that day. We talked for a long time. Peter was very discouraged about the school. It had become "boring." He was also upset because he had not been doing any reading—for classes or on his own. For the first months of school he had been able to blame his lack of "constructive" activity on his difficulty in adjusting to the total freedom Elizabeth Cleaners offered. But now, in April, he no longer believed that his inability to adjust to the "free" school setting would vanish with time.

I realized in talking to Peter that we, as teachers, had not been paying enough attention to the specific needs of our students. Peter had a different sense of what "education" was all about than some of the other sutdents. But we had not adjusted our program to meet his particular expectations. We had paid far too much attention to the group as a whole and neglected the individual student. I said all this to Peter and promised to try my best to remedy the situation as soon as possible.

Peter had always been interested in the Marxism class and had been willing to do reading for it. Unfortunately, the class had been held up because few of the other students were as willing to do their preparation. I told Peter to do the assigned reading for the next day's class and promised that there would be a class even if only the two of us were prepared to take part in it. From now on I would work with Peter at his own pace; if that could be done within the confines of a group class—fine; if not, we'd start our own independent study project.

Ten minutes after I finished talking with Peter, Cathy called with the same complaints as Peter but a lot more upset. She said that the storefront just didn't feel like a school any more. She enjoyed herself while she was there, but never felt that she had accomplished anything worthwhile. I repeated to her what I had said to Peter and asked her to read the pamphlet assigned for the Marxism class. She could join Peter and me in discussing it the next day. I tried to reassure her that somehow we'd work everything out. Elizabeth Cleaners would begin to feel more like a school for her—if that was what she wanted.

My conversations with Peter and Cathy had forced me to re-evaluate the year's "education" for these two in particular and the whole school in general. I couldn't disagree with their dissatisfaction: they felt a lack of accomplishment because there had been little actual progress they could see, touch, feel—no reports written, no list of books read, nothing one could point to with pride as "mine." And no matter how much we distrusted the type of "learning" that could be tangibly measured, we could not discount some students' needs for visible achievement. For too many students, classes were providing a passive rather than an active learning experience. They weren't taking the reading assignments seriously because they noticed that classes went on whether they read or didn't read.

As a result, classes were "entertaining" but couldn't provide all the students with the sense of concrete achievement they needed. We had to find something else, another form of educational activity that would succeed where the classes had failed. Maybe individual projects, like the one on Marxism I had promised Peter, would work. At the moment I couldn't think of anything else.

During that same period I was beginning to get more and more panicked about the lack of progress on the student part of our book. Our June fifteenth deadline was rapidly approaching, but so far only Vashti had written anything suitable. I wanted to get the kids to write, yet knew intuitively that they couldn't write about the school while they felt so ambivalent about it. We had to put things right in the storefront first; if we were successful the writing would come naturally.

I had talked to Peter and Cathy on a Tuesday night. Jack Litewka had canceled his Wednesday creative writing class. I wanted to use that time to talk about some of the problems Peter and Cathy had brought up and to find out if the kids were interested in Adrienne's suggestion about a workshop in educational writing. We'd read *Summerhill*, George Dennison's *Lives of Children*, and some of the other books written on alternative education. After we'd read and discussed what others had written about their schools, we'd be better prepared to write our own book.

Jack's class was scheduled for eleven-thirty. I sensed that something was wrong even before I arrived at the storefront that morning. On my way up Columbus Avenue, I met Jeff, who told me that the oceanography class had been called off because only three students had shown up for it. He was going home for the day.

The storefront was vibrating with restless energy. Buncey, Pablo, Jacob, Matt, and Guy were bouncing off the walls, apparently not overly upset that the morning's scheduled classes had been canceled. Their exuberance only depressed me. Cathy came into the storefront to ask when the Marxism class would be held. She had stayed up till past one the night before, reading the assigned pamphlet twice through and taking detailed notes. She felt good about having done a solid piece of work and couldn't wait for class to begin. Miriam showed up a few

minutes later. She reacted as I had to the chaotic atmosphere inside the storefront. I told her that Peter, Cathy, and I were going to have a discussion about the Marxism pamphlet and asked if she wanted to be in it too. She did. I handed her a copy of the pamphlet and she went away to read it.

Things started to settle down a bit. Someone got out crayons and paper and everyone except Cathy and me started drawing. We talked about libraries and grandmothers while we waited for Miriam to read the pamphlet and Peter to arrive so we could have a Marxism class. When it was finally held, the class went very well. Almost fifteen students sat in, although the discussion centered around the four of us who had done the reading.

After class, Cathy, Jane, Michele and I went to the Pizza Parlour to eat lunch and talk. Cathy said she had really liked the Marxism class but wanted to get involved in a lot of other things too. Michele asked Jane when the class on women in the labor movement was going to start, and Cathy wanted to know if we could offer a class on the American Indian. I was struck by the fact that the students—and the teachers too—always sought to channel their interest in a particular subject matter into a group class. When Cathy said she wanted to learn something about Indians, our immediate reaction was to try to start an "Indian class." Maybe this was part of our problem. We talked about it for a while, all agreeing that a teacher-directed class on Indians or women in the labor movement might not be the best way to learn about these subjects. We'd do better to experiment with different types of learning situations, like small study groups in which the responsibility for class sessions would lay with the entire group rather than just the teacher. All those interested in the subject could meet together in the study group and collectively decide on reading matter, assignments, projects, trips, etc. There would be no distinction between teachers who "ran" the class and students who "took" it.

At Friday's general meeting, we told the other students about our idea: the group agreed to give the study groups a try. We all understood that no one should be in a study group unless he or she was prepared to do the reading that the group had assigned. There would be no passive participants in the study groups, though classes would still be offered which one could attend without doing any preparation.

Jane and I had planned to take the following Monday and Tuesday as our Easter vacation. The students had decided weeks before that they didn't want to have a vacation. They'd hold school by themselves without the full-time teachers. They scheduled the first meetings of the study groups for the two days we'd be away.

I got back to school on Wednesday. In the two days we had been gone, Elizabeth Cleaners seemed to have drifted further into limbo. Students had appeared sporadically Monday and Tuesday; some classes had been canceled because too few students showed up for them; and, most disappointing of all, the study groups had never met. All our beautiful plans for student-run classes had come to nothing.

I taught a history class that morning and we had our first People's Class, a sort of radical high school show-and-tell where the kids talk about some of the things they are doing outside the storefront. In the afternoon we played our first basketball game—with a group of outpatients from a local psychiatric clinic. Their team had obviously worked together for a long time. All five were good ballplayers; they had set plays, and all knew the rules. Our team consisted of Vincent and Anthony, who grew up playing playground ball, and a group of students who had trouble dribbling the length of the court. Cathy, Vashti, and Deirdre played along with everyone else. This slightly unnerved the opposition, who had trouble relating to the presence of women on the basketball court. When the game was finally called on account of the other team's captain coming down from a rebound with a bloody nose, the score was tied. On the way out of the gym, I reminded everyone that the first session of our "educational writing" workshop was scheduled for eleven o'clock the next morning.

I had enjoyed the basketball game and my history class, but not enough to temper my disappointment at the way school had fallen apart on Monday and Tuesday while the teachers were away. It was apparent that student-directed study groups couldn't function without a deeper commitment by the students to at least present themselves at the scheduled hours. As things now stood, only the teachers were responsible for appearing on time; students didn't have to come at all if they didn't feel like it. In theory, this arrangement had sounded fine; in practice, it wasn't working so well.

It was also becoming clear that my initial stance of total noninvolvement in the decision-making process, though perhaps correct for the beginning of the year, was faulty as a permanent definition of my role as teacher. When we were interviewing for a teacher to replace Elaine, Vashti asked for my opinion on a certain applicant. I refrained from giving it—it was the students' decision to make, not mine. Vashti didn't agree. She said I was as much a part of the school as the students. And besides I'd have to work with the new teacher, so it would be helpful for everyone involved if I expressed my preferences. Vashti was right. Our free school had begun to function as a community—and no member of a community has the right to opt out of the decision-making process.

I began to openly express my feelings on the way things were going in the storefront. We held our first "educational writing" workshop on Thursday, two days after the teachers' vacation had ended. I told the kids how disappointed I was that very little had happened the two days the teachers were away. It was time to make some changes in the way we operated our free school—or so I thought. I read to the students from an article about the LEAP school that one of the teachers there had recommended to me:

> Free-wheeling and unorthodox as it is, LEAP is anything but a "free-form" school. Originally, the directors and teachers felt that students who had been damaged by the confines of public school education would want little or no structure in their academic life. "But," student Liza Herman points out "in totally free schools, people just sort of wander around. They procrastinate and nothing happens. It's a reaction to public school—but it doesn't work out." LEAP therefore has been moving toward, not away from structure. Students and teachers together formulate the rules, and they can be tough ones. Students must come to school. If they have to be absent, they must call in. Three cut days are allowed each month. Three latenesses count as one cut day. Problems and gripes are aired in "group raps," held twice a week, attendance by the whole school required.

I was surprised to find many of the kids reacting positively to the notion of rules and structure. Buncey suggested that students at Elizabeth Cleaners who wanted to take a course should sign up for it and be held responsible by the group for attending the classes they signed up for. Everyone agreed with this idea, though no one mentioned any sanction to be applied to the student who signed up for but didn't attend a class or study group. We talked about the study groups again: that they would fail miserably unless the students took upon themselves the responsibility for making them work.

At our weekly meeting that Friday, each student wrote out a list of the classes and small study groups he or she planned to be in and committed himself or herself to attending the classes and actively preparing for and participating in the study groups. This whole setup would not have been possible earlier in the year. The very idea of committing yourself to come to a class even if you didn't really feel like it was contrary to the principles on which our free school was founded. But the school was drifting apart; something had to be done to bring us back together again.

It would be nice to conclude this article with a glowing report on the instant success of our new rules and structures. We would then be able to look back on our first year at Elizabeth Cleaners as a search for a free school model which, once found, guaranteed perpetual success. Although school appeared to go better with our new structures, it would be naive to believe that we have discovered any permanent solutions. A set of structures can only respond to a particular situation, and a free school—as an organic, growing community—is by definition ever-changing. Creating a free school is and must be an ongoing process rather than a series of acts with a definite conclusion.

We have, however, learned much in the course of a full year. We have bolstered our confidence in our own ability to run a free school without sliding into the traditional hierarchical patterns of institutional education. Elizabeth Cleaners Street School will never reach that anxiety-free state of existence—so like death—that some insist should be our goal, but we will exist as a *free* school just as long as there are students who want us to.