



Education Development Center, Inc.

The looting seemed a lark; the burning frightened ghetto children.

Riots: a teaching tool

by Patricia McBroom

For several years now a lack of relevance in education has been open and apparent. Except for academic-minded students who use school to gather credits for college, education makes little change in the lives of students, particularly those from deprived backgrounds.

Educators have been talking about relevance for decades. They hope to make school a meaningful rather than preparatory experience, but few have been able to come to grips with it.

Now, however, the emergence of explosive domestic social crises in the nation's cities (SN: 4/20, p. 373), has given impetus to some fundamental innovations. Not only are new opportunities opening for educators, but as social scientists find handles to social phenomena as they emerge, new insights are likely to develop.

Such an opportunity was seized in Washington, D.C., when ghetto schools—which had earlier been consolidated into a model school district where experiments in relevance were taking place—devoted two days in the elementary schools for children to work out their reactions to the disorders following the slaying of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Concerned that teachers would ignore the crisis taking place in their own backyard, the Model School Division that runs the 24 schools centered around Cardozo High School in the capital's central city rushed through a bulletin advising: "Remember, class simply cannot go on as usual."

It didn't. Under the guidance of Cardozo's Innovation Team, the children poured out themes and drawings on looting, burning, non-violence, Dr. King (about whom many children knew very little), "soul," white people and personal hopes—enough material to form the basis of a year's curriculum in social studies.

Some of the children's comments offer insight into the forces they contend with in their own lives, and should open a window to the ghetto:

- "I took things because everybody did and we did not have anything so we took what we want."
- "The saddest thing I saw was my girl friend stealing."

"A President dies, a city breaks up . . . and teachers go on conjugating verbs."

- "The stores in my neighborhood should have been burned because they cheat people and the storekeepers are mean."

• "I march and march, my feet get bigger, I pray and pray but I'm still a nigger! That what I call soul."

- "Soul is a feeling inside."

Costello Bishop, a member of Boston's Educational Development Center, a non-profit organization focusing on curriculum innovation, was in Washington following the disorders helping the Innovation Team publish some of the

children's material in a 48-page book.

"I came expecting hostility and thinking the kids would be suffering guilt feelings," says Bishop. Neither turned out to be true.

Characteristically, the children considered looting to be a game, while they were frightened and upset by the burning.

"Every day in school," says Bishop, "kids would come up with looted items of clothing and no feeling of guilt." At the same time, he says, "I was totally unprepared for their bubbling spontaneity."

Dr. Joseph T. English, a psychiatrist in charge of health affairs at the Office of Economic Opportunity puts it another way: "Kids in a poor community pick up from their parents the idea that things are so bad they have nothing to lose."

They would see looting as a game, says Dr. English, and not so different a game from that played by prep school kids who "occasionally go on a tear." Seriousness comes with the burning.

Raw material for another insight came in rather stereotyped and limited reactions shown in much of the material. Asked their hopes for the future, many children wanted things pretty much as they were before the riot, says Bishop.

The Cardozo material is most surprising in its uniqueness—other schools in other cities apparently failed to realize that "a time of crisis can be a time of learning." As one observer remarked: "A President dies, a city breaks

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up in disorder, and teachers go on conjugating verbs."

"We owe it to the kids to put them in a safe situation so they can talk about what's on their minds," comments Bishop.

"Elementary school children are interested in the same things as urbanologists and professors are", says Dr. Robert Coles, Harvard psychiatrist, "differences in class background and differences in the relation and responsibility of land-owners to the law. We have an opportunity to help children come to terms with a large area of their lives, with theories, thoughts and experiences that they have anyway."

Many people, says Dr. Coles, have the notion it is good to spare the child as much as possible. But there is an entire clinical tradition saying the opposite: that stress is an opportunity and powerful force for learning.