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SECTION: MAGAZINE; Pg. W08**LENGTH:** 7425 words**HEADLINE:** The **Edge Of Innocence**; Third grade is on the borderline between childhood and preadolescence. The good news is, the kids in Room 320 haven't crossed it yet**BYLINE:** Bob Thompson**BODY:**

"We are monsters like no other," Mrs. Freda calls out. Twenty-six children sprawl before her on the classroom rug.

"WE ARE MON-STERS LIKE NO OTH-ER!" they shout back, articulating each syllable as though it were a separate word.

"We will stomp you and your mother."

"WE WILL STOMP YOU AND YOUR MOTH-ER!" They're stomping their feet.

"Sound off!"

"MON-STERS!"

"Say it again!"

"MON-STERS!"

"Bring it on down!"

"MON-STERS! MON-STERS! MON-STERS! WE RULE!"

It's 11:25 on a winter morning at John Eaton Elementary School, and if you're a third-grader in Lisa Freda's class, this is how your day has begun: You've walked through the bright red door of the classic brick D.C. Public Schools building at 34th and Lowell streets NW and up the wide staircase to Room 320, maybe right at 8:45 but more likely a few minutes late. You've stashed your lunch and your backpack in the plastic bins outside the door, jammed your coat into the rack in the back of the room and found your seat at one of the six round tables arranged against the east and west walls. You've talked to your friends and written in your journal and talked to your friends some more. When you've finished writing, or sometimes when you haven't, you've plopped down in a circle on the rug -- in a boy-girl pattern, please -- and slapped hands as you've greeted your neighbors by name:

"Ciao, Melvin" . . .

"Ciao, Julia" . . .

"Ciao, Ricky" . . .

"Ciao, Stephany" . . .

"Ciao, Charles" . . .

You've taken turns sharing ("This is my Sports Illustrated magazine that my dad got for me and my sister"). You've read what Mrs. Freda has written on the flip chart in the front of the room ("Happy Birthday, Roman! . . . Find your new seat, write in your journal, and have QUIET conversations as you find out something new about your new table friends"). You've worked hard on your math problem of the day, and after math, when the Spanish teacher has arrived and Mrs. Freda has left the room, you have actually paid attention for a while ("Tengo ocho anos -- I am 8 years old"). But not for long. Because it is a well-known scientific fact -- though you won't have science till Wednesday -- that when 26 third-graders are crammed into a 700-square-foot classroom and their regular teacher ducks out for even a few minutes, they will start to behave like heated molecules in a laboratory demonstration of Brownian movement, displaying the kind of constant, irregular motion that causes them to collide with greater and greater frequency the higher the temperature rises.

Or in this case, the longer the teacher stays out of the room.

It seems like Mrs. Freda's been gone for hours. A boy hits a girl over the head with a binder ("Hey! Stop!"), then moves on to pester two other girls. A girl rolls up her pants to display a removable tattoo. Boys fight ruler duels and poke each other with their hands and elbows. A girl does a little dance on the rug. The buzz of unauthorized conversation has become a steady roar.

"What time did Spanish class start?" Melvin asks.

"It's supposed to be over at 11:15," Dylan says.

Finally, it is.

Mrs. Freda sends you to get your snack and she picks up the book she's been reading aloud. It's the latest in the Time Warp Trio series by Jon Scieszka, called *It's All Greek to Me*. "Okay, are we ready?" she asks, and turns to Chapter 9 and starts to read the part where the chanting monsters of Greek mythology march on Mount Olympus -- "We are monsters like no other!" -- to which you respond, stomping.

She keeps reading.

Two minutes later, you're as quiet as third-graders can possibly be.

Childhood is famously mysterious territory to most adults, despite the fact that we all lived there once, and third grade -- surprisingly -- may be as mysterious as any part of it. Falling as it does between the hyper-analyzed stages of early childhood and the much-feared (and hence much-examined) teenage years, it's both a crucial transitional period and "a somewhat neglected age," says Polly Greenberg, a veteran student of child development who edits the journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. "There's much less research about the 8-to-12 group."

More important, perhaps, third-graders can fall through the cracks in another way. Eight- and 9-year-olds can appear so grown-up, so capable compared with younger children, that their parents have a tendency to relax, to pay a little less attention than they have before.

"It's an easy age to lose them," Greenberg says.

To talk to the people who know third-graders best -- their teachers, their parents and educational specialists of various kinds -- is to start to see just how much there is to pay attention to. "It's one of the most rapidly developing ages there is," says June Wagner, a diagnostician and learning specialist who runs Educational Assessment Associates in Bethesda. "To go from the end of second grade to the end of third grade takes in as many changes in a child as I know of."

Children develop at very different rates, Wagner cautions, and their progress can be wildly non-linear. "Sometimes

they explode: They can be just chugging along, and then all of a sudden -- wow!" But speaking generally, there are major cognitive changes that occur around age 8, when most kids enter third grade.

"They're beginning to abstract," Wagner says. "They're beginning to see the overall commonalities or similarities between things that are very different." Parts-to-whole reasoning -- the ability to see how forests and trees relate -- becomes much easier for them. "And this is what math is all about."

Physical changes affect third-graders, too. They read longer books with fewer pictures than they did the year before -- in part just because they've had more practice, but in part because their visual tracking has improved. Their handwriting gets better and they learn to write in cursive; improved fine motor skills have made this possible. Dribbling a soccer ball across an asphalt playground, they suddenly look more coordinated; large motor skills are kicking in as well.

Emotionally, they're much more aware of the world around them and how they fit in. "They're so concerned about what other people are thinking," says Kathie Clements, who has taught third grade at the Lowell School in Northwest D.C. for 13 years. "They're very quick to size up their peers; they know very quickly what other kids' strengths and weaknesses are." Friendships get more important, and sometimes more traumatic. Boys and girls are increasingly likely to keep to themselves.

As for academics, third grade is a year of skills consolidation. "To me, it's the most important year in elementary school," Clements says. "We've got to get them ready to go." Because if third-graders don't have the basics in place by June, "they're not going to be able to succeed from that point on."

Her view is widely shared. Educators see third grade as a demarcation line where early childhood, with its warmth and fuzziness and lower expectations, comes to an end. "By the time kids are 8 or 9 years old," says Laura Solomon, a special education consultant in Silver Spring, "it's like we say, 'C'mon, babe, it's time! Let's go! We're ready!' " Solomon works exclusively with children who are struggling. It's no accident, she believes, that she sees more third- and fourth-graders than children of any other age group.

And yet, precisely because it is on the border of preadolescence but not yet beyond, third grade is also the Indian summer of childhood -- a sunny time that's especially sweet because of what lies ahead. As a chorus of John Eaton voices attests:

"It's just a pluperfect age. It's like they've got these little abilities to analyze and they haven't been too touched by the world yet," says the school librarian. "Total enthusiasm . . . They're willing to take risks," says an Eaton teacher. "They're still young. They haven't yet adopted the roles adults play," says another. "They still love you, and it's not embarrassing for them to love you," says a third.

"They're not fresh totally yet," says Lisa Freda, and laughs. "You can still talk to them. There's still somewhat of an innocence, they're still wanting to please. They haven't quite reached that stage of, you know, 'Who cares? I'm doing what I'm doing. And if you don't like it, tough!' "

"Boys and girls," Mrs. Freda is saying, "I notice that no one is ready . . . Okay, Sofia, what are you prepared to do today?"

It's Mad Minute time in Room 320. This means a math exercise, with 40 problems on a single sheet of paper, in which the third-graders race the clock. But it hasn't started yet, because first they have to sort out which level everyone's on. "Nicola? . . . Eliza? . . . Sammy, what are you ready for -- addition, subtraction or mixed?"

There's a delay as customized Mad Minutes are constructed for Marek and Dylan. Some boys do a kind of sidestep gallop across the room. Mrs. Freda stands on the rug, arms folded, and looks at the clock: "Eight, five, three, two -- go!"

Then comes the rustle of two dozen papers turning over, followed by a shocking silence; it's broken only by a parakeet's low chirps. Across the rug from the bird, a calendar proclaims 2000 "the year of the multicultural child in America," and sure enough, if you look around, you'll see a roomful of multicultural American children -- writing, erasing, counting on their fingers and whispering urgently to themselves.

Sofia's parents are from El Salvador and Mexico. Marek's father is from Nigeria, and Elizabeth's mother completed her third grade in Argentina. Roman was born in Russia. But there's more than just international diversity here. "Our kids come from many quadrants of the city, not just Cleveland Park," says John Eaton's principal, Willie McElroy -- and they do: 23 percent, at last count, were out-of-boundary students. That number is somewhat lower in Mrs. Freda's class, but the percentage of Hispanic kids is higher than the norm: There were 10 before a boy moved away over the Christmas break. Many of them live in apartment buildings along Connecticut and Wisconsin avenues, and

their parents are mostly first-generation immigrants to the United States.

There are third-graders whose parents drive them miles each day from Shepherd Park or Southeast, and there is a third-grader who takes two buses to get to school from an apartment near Scott Circle (that would be Lucas, the tall, smiling boy with the dark curly hair), and there is a third-grader whose morning commute consists of walking out the door of his family's big white house and across the street.

That would be Dylan, who's just finishing his Mad Minute now.

He pumps his arms in triumph and turns his paper over. Then he turns it back again to check his work -- a mix of single- and double-digit multiplication.

"Stop," Mrs. Freda says.

"Dylan, I did it!" Lucas yells from across the room. Dylan is walking over to see how Marek has done. On his way back, he and Lucas put their hands on each other's shoulders and shake themselves with excitement.

Math is big in Room 320, and Mrs. Freda is one of the main reasons: She teaches it with creativity and enthusiasm. But Dylan, a serious and knowledgeable baseball fan who favors Orioles jackets and Mark McGwire T-shirts, is another. "I don't have a Dylan," says Carolyn Cobden, Eaton's other third-grade teacher. "Very few people do. He's just exceptional when it comes to math."

When he was 4 years old, he started playing numbers-oriented games with his parents. (If you had asked him what is 10 plus 11, his father says, "he would have said, 'Blackjack.' ") Before long, on car trips, he was requesting addition problems just for fun. Last year he surged past the second-grade math curriculum, and he has now moved on to multiplication, division and basic algebra. "What's 728 divided by four? You have 15 seconds," he says to a visitor one day, and smiles when the answer comes back -- just barely -- within the allotted time.

Dylan's classmates acknowledge his talent and look up to him for it, but they also strive to keep up. Just outside the classroom door is a sign that reads, "Our Goals for School." One boy wrote that he hoped to get past level 20 in Mad Minutes because "I want to beat Dylan," and 18 of the 26 posted goals mention math. Sofia has been taking extra math on Saturdays, though Mrs. Freda says she's doing well and doesn't really need it. Dylan himself plans to work on "quadruple regrouping subtraction" because "it will help me complete my fall goal of getting to level 25."

There's more to third-grade academics than math, of course. Earlier this morning there was a spelling test ("Number four: NOISE. Try not to make NOISE"). Reading is big, too. The third-graders read aloud to one another, randomly stopping and calling on a classmate to continue (this is known as "popcorn"). They read on their own at DEAR time (short for "drop everything and read") -- everything from 101 School Jokes to Mossflower, by Brian Jacques. And their teacher reads to them every day. Since finishing up *It's All Greek to Me*, she's moved on to one of Louis Sachar's *Wayside School* series; the cast of whacked-out characters includes the meanest teacher in the history of *Wayside School*, the dread Mrs. Gorf, who strikes terror into children's hearts even after they've made her disappear.

Lisa Freda has been teaching at Eaton since 1974, with a decade or so out to raise her own kids. She has a reputation as both an excellent teacher and -- most of the time -- an easygoing one, the kind who keeps things loose and gets kids to relax and offers frequent hugs because she thinks third-graders need them.

Most of the time, but not always. She can lose patience with them, too.

The other day, she says, when her students walked into the room after lunch, she lowered her voice and told them, "We need to talk." And I said, 'Mrs. Freda has left,' and one of the kids said, 'Mrs. Gorf is here -- what happened?' And I said, 'Why do you think Mrs. Gorf came in?' And they all, you know -- hands went up:

" 'We talk too much.'

"And I said, 'That's part of it.'

" 'We talk too loud.'

" 'That's part of it.'

" 'We talk at the wrong time.'

" 'That's a lot of it!' "

She tries never to lose her sense of humor, though. When it's time to work on grammar, she pulls out a book called *Caught'ya Again!* and copies a passage onto a small white chalkboard:

"Mrs. Obnoxious the obnoxious teacher sat down at her desk and her eyes dared anyone to move and she pointed her vermilion-painted fingernail at an timid girl Stephany and she frowned evilly"

"First mistake?" she says, and the hands go up, and they work on it until they get it right.

Another morning. Time to choose your table. It's a privilege you don't normally have in Mrs. Freda's classroom -- she assigns kids seats as she thinks best, then switches them around a few times a year. But just for these two days, she's letting you try it on your own.

"Sit wherever you like today," she told the class yesterday, but maybe you were late, or maybe you just didn't hear, and you ended up at a table with some seriously annoying boys. So today you've come in early and staked out better real estate.

Except -- what's this?

You're being evicted!

Gently but firmly, with an apologetic smile and an arm around your shoulder, Stephany is steering you toward the next table. Because this seat is for her friend Sofia, and Sylvia and Laura are already here, and . . .

"You guys are going to pay for that," you say. But it's an empty threat.

If you're a third-grader in Room 320, or anywhere else for that matter, there's probably nothing as important to you as your social life. Never mind music or science or art or P.E. or even math and reading -- it's what you did with your friends on the playground that you come home talking about. And it's those visceral connections -- or the loss of them, or the lack of them -- that can cause the most joy and pain.

"Friendships among children are a little like falling in love later on," says Ana Tejblum, the mother of third-grade twins (Alexandra, who's in Ms. Cobden's class, and Elizabeth, who's in Mrs. Freda's). "I remember I felt that way when I was that age." Tejblum became attached to one particular girl, she says, "and the year ended and for some reason I was so worried that she wouldn't be coming back to school, which of course she did, but I just remember the strength of the emotion. And the following year it was like, 'What did I ever see in her?'"

Most of these kids genuinely like one another -- the overall friendliness quotient is high, and pretty much everyone interacts. But the table-choosing reveals where some of the stronger connections lie.

Here's Nkosi, sliding over next to Sammy, and Billy, happily framed by Marek and Melvin, and Sofia, claiming the seat her friends have saved. Here are Dylan, Lucas, Roman and Michael, grinning like successful co-conspirators. And here are Ariel and Elizabeth, playing a hand-slap game:

Up high

Down low

In space

In your face!

Elizabeth is a neat, compact girl in a yellow sweater, red pants and red sneakers. When she's called on in class, which is often, she gives her thoughtful answers so quietly and quickly that they can sometimes be hard to understand, and when she walks, which she does purposefully while looking straight ahead, she leans about 10 degrees in the direction of her destination. Ariel is an even smaller girl -- "But I only weigh 42 pounds!" she protests one day when someone tells her she shouldn't share the classroom's fragile rocking chair -- and her smile, when she chooses to display it, is almost as wide as her face.

Each has a kind of quiet self-sufficiency. As a twin, Elizabeth doesn't have the need for a best friend that third-graders often feel. And Ariel, despite her surface shyness, is comfortable with just about everybody. Both girls have been friends with others in the room, but they've been infatuated with each other of late. They stretch out together on the rug at snack time, hang out together on the playground, head off together for the book club on

Friday afternoons. Just now, they're hopping across the room like frogs.

But forget the individual friendships for a moment. Look around at the six tables in Room 320 today, and you'll notice something else about third-grade social structure. Three tables have nothing but girls at them. Three others include only boys.

This wasn't true yesterday, the first day of the choose-your-table experiment. Somehow Billy and Marek ended up with Gina and Nicola at what turned out to be the hardest-working table in the room. It didn't hurt that the boys in question are more socialized than many third-grade males. Marek is, as his mother says, "a gentleman," and Billy -- who's the youngest kid in the class, though you wouldn't know it -- is liked by one and all.

Still, that table didn't last, and today they've settled in with Melvin and Sam. Where there's a lot of Pokemon talk going on.

What separates the third-grade boys and girls? The most obvious factor is the boys' sheer physicality. There are girls who are plenty athletic and don't mind mixing it up a bit, just as there are boys who aren't and do. But on average, the boys are far more Brownian in their movements. Physical sparring seems to be a second language for them.

"They're always fighting," a girl complains one morning amid a frenzy of wrestling and hip-checking that's broken out while Mrs. Freda talks to a parent downstairs. "Some people in this school are very violent," says a girl from Ms. Cobden's class a few days later. A boy has choked her on the playground, she reports.

There are cultural divides as well. Take Pokemon. It's not that some girls don't collect the pricey little monsters, which were banned from Eaton last fall except for a designated Pokemon Day. But they're not completely crazed the way the boys are. There are boys who coat their notebooks with scrawled Pokemon characters, and boys who fill the air with Pokemon jabber ("Pikachu! Blastoise! Transform! Shield! Fire Blast! Pop-Pop-Pop!") and boys who dart out of sight by the coat rack to plan weekend trades ("I'll bring \$ 15 tomorrow -- is it a deal?").

"What's your favorite Pokemon?" Nicola deadpans one day. "My favorite Pokemon is Crunchy." There's no such character, of course. The boys, in turn, make retching noises when the Spice Girls are mentioned.

But this is surface stuff. There are more subtle boy-girl separations taking shape this year.

Last year, if you'd been cataloguing strong connections in Eaton's second grade, you'd have put Ariel and Lucas high on the list. And why not? Lucas is an immensely likable boy. When Elizabeth and her sister are describing someone, they will sometimes use him as a sort of niceness yardstick -- "He's kind, but not as kind as Lucas," they will say. As for Ariel, she has two older brothers, and her strong affection for them may explain her willingness to leap the gender gap. Whatever the reasons, she and Lucas were inseparable last year.

In second grade, that was no big deal.

In September, Mrs. Freda had her students write the first installment of their goals for school. "This fall, I want to work on not talking to Lucas a lot," read Ariel's. To achieve this, she added, "I won't sit next to him a lot . . . I'll try different people so I don't start talking to that person . . . I won't look at him unless it's the right time to."

It's not that she wanted to end the friendship -- she was concerned, instead, that with too much talking she "might miss something important." And it's not that she and Lucas don't still whisper and laugh and scoot across the room to sit together at morning meetings.

Inch by inch, however, they are going their separate ways.

There are other boy-girl friendships among the Eaton third-graders. These kids are not yet fully captive to what some teachers call "the cooties thing." And yet, they're already starting to get teased about "liking" and "loving" each other. In a year or two, they'll be living in a wholly different world.

"My son's best friend was a girl," Lisa Freda says. She was a tough kid, who would go on to be one of the few girls to play in Montgomery County's youth ice hockey league. But by fifth grade, "if they sat on the school bus together to talk on the way to school, people said, 'Eeeeuw!' And they just couldn't deal with it. They never spoke again."

"Ooo-la-la-LA!" Roman says.

He's wearing headphones and clutching a mouse, moving stacks of dice around on a computer screen.

"Ba-ba-BA!"

He nods his head, waves an arm in the air.

"Fa-fa-fa-five -- where ARE you?"

Mrs. Freda's class has split itself in two for now. Half the kids are in the art room, where they're filling sheets of paper with tiny dots in imitation of Georges Seurat. The rest are here in Eaton's computer lab, where they're glued to a bank of 14 slightly used Hewlett-Packard Brios that were scooped up for a song by the John Eaton Home and School Association after the NATO summit last year. "How smart can a kid get?" asks a brightly colored collage outside the door, then answers its own question: "There is no limit."

Sofia clicks on a menu. A grid of dancing figures appears on her screen.

"What level are you on in Flipster?" Blanca asks her.

"Hard," she says.

The computer teacher, Mrs. Eastman, has given them a choice today. Combo Cubes is an addition-skills game in which they rearrange three stacks of dice until the sums beneath them are correct. Flipster requires them to match up shapes that are identical but oriented differently -- F-shapes, for instance, which might be upside down or backward or lying on their sides -- by sliding, turning or flipping them around.

"I got 30 points!"

"It's a cool game, you should try it!"

"Roman, I got 60!"

"Like what I did? Look!"

Equity is important to Susan Eastman, and she makes sure that all the third-graders -- who get to use the computer lab for the first time this year -- are exposed to the same curriculum. "I don't care what ability level they're at," she says. "The only difference I see is acquisition rate." Some kids don't have computers at home, so it takes them a while to get comfortable using a mouse. Some have come from other schools, and aren't well enough grounded in basic concepts. "But this is the way they're going to learn. They need that exposure." And with computers, the kids who are more advanced aren't penalized. They can charge ahead at their own pace.

But it's not just a question of different ability levels, she believes. Intelligence displays itself in different forms as well.

"Bup bup ba-DA!" Roman says triumphantly.

He's just broken 200 points in Combo Cubes, which -- though he has no way of knowing this -- puts him ahead of maybe half the room. Next to him sits a quiet boy who's doing Flipster. Roman leans over to look at his screen.

"Oh my God!" he says.

Eamon is up to 830 -- more than twice as many points as anyone else.

One of the biggest challenges for a third-grade teacher -- as it is for any teacher, really -- is this question of working with kids who learn at different rates and in different ways. Just seeing these differences can be challenging enough. Eamon, for example,

isn't someone whose work stands out in the day-to-day life of Room 320. He's got both learning disabilities and fine motor skills problems, and many things still come hard for him. But his spatial reasoning is off the charts.

"He couldn't take that problem out of his head and put it down on a piece of paper," says Carolyn Cobden, who had Eamon when she was teaching first grade. "But the ways he can visualize things are unbelievable. And you know -- you take another kid who's brilliant in mathematical calculations, and they might not have that same spatial relationship."

The school works hard to individualize instruction (that's what Mad Minutes are all about). Sometimes kids in need of extra help will quietly leave the room; more often, English as a Second Language or special education teachers will come in to work with them. The classroom teachers will often adjust their expectations -- on the length of writing projects, for instance -- to match the ability level of the kids involved.

But it's not easy with 26 kids in a room. And life can get harsh for the ones who fall behind.

"The kids I see at third and fourth grade have started to feel really bad about themselves," says Laura Solomon, the Silver Spring special education consultant. "They think they can't do it, they all think they're stupid. It is a rare kid having trouble in school who doesn't think it's their fault."

Sometimes they withdraw, sometimes they act out. Lindsay Wasserman chose the second route. "I was really bad in third grade," says Wasserman, a recent American University graduate who splits her time as a "co-teacher" between Mrs. Freda's and Ms. Cobden's classes. "I was, like, principal's office every day." She stole kids' papers, erased their names and substituted hers. She wrote "swear letters" and delivered them to the teacher. Finally her mother had her tested. "That's when they realized I had a learning disability . . . and everything was getting so frustrating that I was lashing out."

It doesn't have to come to that. If struggling kids can hold on to their confidence -- perhaps by proving to themselves that they are good at some things, if not others -- "they really do push on and excel," says Eaton special education teacher Michael LeFlore. But here's where the third-graders' social antennae make things hard. A first-grader might observe that another child is different, yet not construe the difference as a negative, LeFlore explains. "By third grade they really do think, 'Wow, that kid's not getting it fast enough,' or, 'They're misbehaving, they don't understand the rules like everybody else.' Because of that, they start singling them out and they start ostracizing them."

Which means that sometimes even the sunniest third-grade classroom can sound like this:

"I murdered you -- you're dead!" The taunting voice is coming from the back of the room. Mrs. Freda is talking to a grown-up in the hall. "You shut up before I hit you!" A boy lies on the floor. A foot is planted on his chest. "Machine gun! Machine gun! You're dead! Machine gun! Deadly poison!" The voice becomes a robot voice. "I am un-de-struct-ib-le. Ha ha, I'm indestructible, you stupid pig!" The robot, joined by a second voice, now starts to sing:

Joy to the world,

- - - is dead.

We BAR-

Be-CUED

His HEAD . . .

It's a verse you'll hear repeated in the classroom for days.

Back with Mrs. Eastman in the computer lab, this group's 45 minutes are nearly up. She moves from terminal to terminal, coaching, cheering, encouraging kids to try Flipster with a timer or to switch modes from easy to hard.

"That's how many points you've got?" a boy says scornfully to his neighbor.

"So-o?" the neighbor replies.

Roman leans over to check on Eamon's total one more time. "Nineteen ninety!" he says gleefully.

"That's when I was born!"

He was born in the Siberian city of Tomsk and he came to Eaton nine years later, after he was adopted with his younger brother from a Russian orphanage. The first thing Lisa Freda heard about him -- she was teaching second grade last year, in a class with 19 of the same kids she has this year -- was a message from the office on the classroom intercom:

"Mrs. Freda, you have a new student on the way up."

And there was Roman. It was the first day of school in January. He'd arrived in the United States two days before Christmas.

He spoke, essentially, no English.

Mrs. Freda asked Dylan to be Roman's buddy, to show him where to go and what to do. She joined their hands to let Roman know what she meant. But when Dylan tried to show him where to put his lunchbox, Roman just shook his head and held onto it so tightly that his knuckles whitened. By 1 o'clock, both he and his brother -- who was having an even harder time -- had had enough. Their mother, Patrice Gancie, got a phone call: "Could you please come? They're sobbing."

"Oh, I'm going to cry," Gancie says. "I always cry when I tell this story." But her tears aren't about what happened that first day in Roman's classroom. She's remembering what happened next.

The second-grade theme that fall had been friendship, and Roman's new classmates -- by a stroke of extraordinary luck -- had been working with a book called *My First American Friend*. They had read the true story of a girl who arrived here from China when she was 6 years old -- also speaking no English -- and was thrust into a classroom where she couldn't talk to anyone. They had played charades, to get a sense of how the girl might have felt, and Mrs. Freda had tried to make them think about the many things they take for granted in their lives. What if they needed to go to the bathroom and couldn't say so? How embarrassing would using hand signals be?

On Roman's second day at Eaton, she read the class the book again.

"It turned his life around in school," says Gancie. "The other kids just took it so seriously. From that minute on, I couldn't walk into the school without one of his classmates saying, 'Oh, Roman did this today, and he did that so well! He understood a word today!' "

Every time she'd see him with Dylan, they'd be holding hands. "It was amazing to watch," Dylan's mother recalls. "They could communicate, but they didn't communicate in words." Roman made friends with Lucas, too, and a number of other children. Pretty soon they found out he was good at math.

"Thank goodness that's a universal language," Gancie says. "They were all really impressed: 'You know, Roman, he may not speak English, but he really can do well in math!' " By June, peeking in the classroom door for a glimpse of her son, "I would just see this guy -- he was one of the other kids."

Over the summer his parents just about stopped speaking Russian with him. In September, he was thrilled to get back to school. He couldn't believe his luck, he told a family friend -- couldn't believe that, after his life in Russia had been so difficult, everything was going so well for him now.

Now here he sits, an all-American third-grader with unruly hair and a Kennedy Center sweat shirt, as -- incredibly, just a year after his own arrival -- another brand-new student from Russia walks into Room 320.

Her name is Christina, Mrs. Freda says, and she speaks very little English. She takes a seat at the table nearest the door.

As the morning goes on, the girls at this table ask her what kinds of things she likes to do, and they perform little dances as they try to show her what they're talking about, and at snack time two of them sprint across the room to ask their teacher an urgent question. "Mrs. Freda," Elizabeth says, "can Ariel and I do with Christina the thing that Dylan did with Roman?"

But Roman himself plays no part in this heartwarming scene.

"Roman doesn't speak Russian anymore," the boys at his table tell Lindsay Wasserman when she comes by to ask for his help. And never mind if that's true or not -- though it's certainly true that he doesn't want to. Because there's a more serious reason why he shouldn't have anything to do with his new classmate, and he goes red in the face as his friends point it out:

"It's a girl! It's a girl!"

Monday morning. Sharing time. And to judge from the crowd reaction, things aren't going quite the way they should.

"Oooh!"

"Disgusting!"

"You're gonna give me nightmares!"

A girl has shown off her two talking dolls. ("Knock-knock." "Who's there?" "Kenya." "Kenya who?" "Kenya come out and play?") A boy has talked about his grandmother's new house. (It's the family's first in the United States.) Now another boy is explaining the premise of a movie that he saw on TV yesterday: "Say Candyman five times in the mirror and he'll come up behind you and you'll see blood and he'll slash you up."

"You'll give me nightmares!"

"Oooh!"

"Are you gonna try it?"

"Tell me more about Candyman at recess," a girl whispers after Mrs. Freda suggests that R-rated movies might not be appropriate to share.

Sofia's turn.

"This is my doll Angelica," she says, holding up a small plastic figure with yellow hair, and just as quickly as you left it, you're safe in third grade again.

But not for long.

For while third-graders may still be living in the gated community of childhood, the outside world is beckoning from beyond the walls ("C'mon, babe, it's time! Let's go!"). And the breaches in those walls are increasingly visible in Room 320.

Not that sharing slasher movies is typical of this class. You're more likely to hear about "Stuart Little." Still, teachers worry -- a lot -- that children are being forced into experiences they're not emotionally ready for. A couple of years back, Mrs. Freda says, she had a group of kids whose heavy exposure to R-rated movies, videos and TV made them obsessed with "physical bodies, inappropriate words . . . a lot of the boy-girl thing." She couldn't so much as read Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle -- a classic 1940s children's book that contains no hint of actual innuendo -- without them snickering and hooting over formerly innocent words.

"And this was second grade, this was not third."

Breaches in the walls of childhood come in many forms. All teachers understand that what their students go through at home affects them hugely when they get to class. It's easy to see which kids are desperate for attention or approval, which kids need extra cuddling, which kids have been disoriented by divorce. It's also gratifying to see the ones who've beaten difficult odds. "You done good, he's someone to be proud of," Mrs. Freda told one mother at a parent conference, then added, "I'm familiar with the single-parent thing, because I was a single mother myself for 11 years." Tears all around.

Another breach involves the ratcheting up of academic pressure in the lowest grades. This has happened, teachers say, over many years and for a variety of reasons, among them the trend toward two-earner families (more kids in preschool, leading to more emphasis on academics in kindergarten) and the vogue for achievement testing. Best not to get Lisa Freda started on that.

"It's horrible," she says of the twice-a-year SAT 9 tests required of all D.C. school children first grade and above. "Some of the first-graders cry. They just sit there and they cry, and there's nothing you can do about it. My kids used to cry last year." And what does it say about education "just to tell all these kids that whatever you put on the piece of paper, that's the end result?"

One of the very best things about childhood is that it's a time when racial, cultural and economic differences seem to lack their corrosive power. Here Eaton's diversity is enormously helpful. The school -- both staff and students -- is so thoroughly multicultural in so many ways that the third-graders take this condition for granted. What's more, if it were solely up to them, their attitudes might never change. "Kids don't know to separate themselves," says Carolyn Cobden. "If you just threw a bunch of kids together and left them in a room for 10 years and never involved any outside opinions, they'd survive on their own -- no matter who was in there."

This can't be done, of course.

Parents and teachers alike say that at Eaton, when the children's different backgrounds do start pulling them apart, the issue is likely to be wealth, not race. "The divide, when it becomes evident, is the socioeconomic divide," says Ana Tejblum, who's the president of the Home and School Association, and in third grade, it's still far from insurmountable. Yet third-graders, with their increased self-consciousness and concern about where they fit in the world, are starting to wrestle with the differences they see.

If you're a third-grader in Mrs. Freda's classroom, listening to your friends at sharing time, you can't help but notice that some go downhill skiing in Colorado or jet skiing in Costa Rica, while others are lucky to get to Northern Virginia for a day. You may be startled, when it's your time to share, by the questions about how valuable your Beanie Babies are, or about the price of your new shoes. Perhaps you'll get upset when your mother sends you to school with patches on your jeans, though you'll understand -- and stop complaining -- when she sits you down and tells you firmly that this is nothing to be ashamed of. Perhaps you'll create, from time to time, imaginary possessions and experiences to make up for the ones that you don't have.

Most likely you don't yet worry much about these things. But it will hardly be surprising, as you work to establish your own identity, if you start hanging out with the people you feel most comfortable around. People who like the same kinds of books you do, or take the same kinds of vacations -- or with whom you have more significant things in common.

"One day we were having a pizza party in the classroom," Mrs. Freda says, "and I happened to look and all the Hispanic girls were sitting at one table and they were yak-yak-yak-yak-yakking away." The yakking was in English, as always; their English is very good. "And I said something to them, because everybody else was somewhere else -- I said, 'Why are you all sitting over there?' And they said, 'Oh, we're the Spanish girls. We're the Spanish group. We're talking!' "

Another story:

When Vilma Bautista was pregnant with her first child, Lucas, she was living in an apartment on Wisconsin Avenue, and she would sometimes stroll through Cleveland Park and contemplate his future. It was summertime, she says, and the John Eaton School was empty, but she would sit across the street in the quiet, tree-lined neighborhood with its comfortable old houses and think: This is the school I want for my son.

So here he is, a decade later: the kind of boy who helps with the housework and takes care of his younger brothers and sister, who gets to Eaton by riding two buses in the morning and who pulls out his homework right away when he boards the bus for home. Who seems to have a smile for everyone and gets smiles from everyone in return.

Whose good friend Dylan lives in one of those comfortable old houses near where his mother used to walk.

Dylan's parents, too, had their eyes on Eaton for their children; it's why they bought the house on Lowell Street, his father says. They've been active in the school and sing its praises. Dylan has thrived there, just as Lucas has. And yet -- they've been thinking. Perhaps it's time for private school. The admissions odds are better now than they'll be when Dylan is ready for junior high.

They're not sure they want to do this. They've applied to just one place. But they've included their son in the conversation, and he, in turn, has told his friend about it.

"What's that school you're going to again?" Lucas asks one day.

Maret.

"Where's that?"

Just a few blocks from here.

"Okay, I'll see you, then."

"No!" says Dylan.

He knows that Lucas won't be coming with him if he goes. A worried look comes across his face.

"I'll visit you," says Lucas.

And he smiles.

But that's next year. Eight months from now. Fourth grade! And if you're a third-grader on a January afternoon, fourth grade -- when you'll have Mr. Friedman or Ms. Coti; when you'll sit at desks, not tables; when you'll start to count your age in double digits -- is an eternity away.

Especially on an afternoon like this.

"Roman, you need to be sitting in your seat right now," Ms. Wasserman says.

"Shhhhhh -- who is that?"

"Sofia, grab a book."

Mrs. Freda isn't here today, and Ms. Wasserman, who understands what can happen in these circumstances, is cutting her temporary charges no slack. They've got math problems to work on. When they're done, they're supposed to read. In a while, they'll find out what the homework is, and they can start on that when they've finished everything else.

It's eerily quiet.

They've been working quietly for an hour now.

It's 2:30.

Forty-five minutes to go.

Dylan sticks a pencil through the strap of his baseball cap. Elizabeth frowns, puts her hand up, takes it down. Melvin crosses his legs beneath him on his chair.

Still quiet.

Thirty minutes . . .

Marek gets a book. A girl gets silently up to go to the bathroom.

Still quiet.

Twenty minutes . . .

Sofia and Billy take turns reading to each other -- they're whispering -- from a book called *Squids Will Be Squids*.

Still quiet.

"Okay, we'll work for five more minutes," Ms. Wasserman says. "I'm really impressed with you guys."

As well she should be. As Mrs. Freda would be, if she were here today. As their parents are, when they pause to contemplate the changes they see their children going through.

"He's more confident in himself," they say (that would be Billy), or "I just see her growing in self-confidence and wanting to try things" (Ariel), or "he's a lot happier, a lot less frustrated" (Eamon), or "she's not shy, she's not scared, she's becoming self-assured" (Elizabeth), or "he's more relaxed and having fun" (Charles), or "her confidence level has shot up dramatically as she's gotten better skills" (Gina), or "he's just made this great leap in maturity" (Roman). And just think how self-assured and mature they'll seem by June.

It's 3:15 at last. Time to gather up your stuff and go. But wait --

"It's snowing!" Marek yells.

"It's snowing! It's snowing! It's snowing!" Billy leaps to his feet.

"It's snowing! Blizzard!" Gina hurtles across the room, accidentally whacking Ariel as she goes by.

"It's a snowy day-ay-ay!" Roman jumps up and down.

They're all yelling, leaping, hurtling and colliding now, as they surge across the room and grab their coats and sprint for the door. "It's a miracle!" someone shouts, and surely it is -- third-graders changed to heated molecules in joyous motion, right before your eyes.

Bob Thompson is a staff writer for the Magazine. He will be fielding questions and comments about this article Monday at 1 p.m. at www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline.

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