"Are you crazy?" my father looked at me as if I had just told him I was planning to become the wife of Tarzan and live in a tree house in the jungle, dressed in leopard-skin underwear. "No one goes to live in the mountains," he continued his assault. "What will you do there? It's so far from the city!"

His words stung me and I stepped back, looking for support from the oak paneled door. "Dad," I faltered, "I really need your support here. It's not easy for me to take this job so far away, to be away from the family. But there are no jobs close by. And I do want this chance to be a teacher."

He shrugged his shoulders, for once at a loss for words. I knew he would, in the end, understand. But why was he making it so difficult for me to leave? I was a grown-up person. I was entitled to have a chance to live my own life, to make my own decisions. It would have been nicer, easier, if my decisions were not encumbered by such a family opera!

I would have preferred to find a teaching job closer to home. First year of teaching—it's got enough turmoil on the job, without being alone, in a strange place, far away from friends and loved ones. But as jobs went, this was the only one available for a new teacher in this time of budget cuts and teacher cutbacks. I felt lucky to get it. So what if it were in the mountains, in a small town about 300 miles from the coastal city where my parents lived? I might even get to like it.

Twin Pines School, nestled in a grove of conifers, served the township of San Remo, in what was becoming the most rapid-growth area in the state. Drawn by the clean mountain air, the beautiful landscapes, the low-cost housing, residents found the rural life a refreshing change from the smog, high-density and high cost life on the coast. But there was nothing about the school or the beauty of its setting that had prepared me for this first year of teaching. If the scene was serene, life as a teacher at Twin Pines was anything but!

It didn't take many days for me to discover Barry in my group of 26 combined fifth and sixth graders. He was a gentle and courteous boy, as if someone had actually taken the trouble to teach him some manners—a pleasant change from the other hell-raisers who made up the male complement of the class. On the athletic field, he excelled in virtually every sport offered. During lunch hour, or recess, I liked to watch him shoot baskets, his skill and grace an elegant counterpoint to that rumble-tumble world of unorganized play activity that teachers see twice daily, at the designated hours of recess and lunch. Off the sports field, and in the classroom, he was like a walrus out of water. The grace and skill fell from him, as he wrestled clumsily and unsuccessfully with the demands of the sixth-grade curriculum.

Ever the butt of other children's grim and devastating put-downs, Barry struggled with reading, his pace plodding and his ability to concentrate overpowered by his fierce struggle to decode words. But at least he could achieve some marginal success. Where he succeeded in distinguishing himself as an utter failure was in math. While the other children were making headway into the wonderful world of fractions and decimals, Barry was defeated by simple, basic number facts. Computation was a puzzle to him, and even the sums given to first graders were a
total mystery. He was able to make some headway with $2 + 2 = 4$, but he was in trouble if the amount of either numeral was increased by a single digit. Two plus three was outside his reach. Forget subtraction.

The other kids did not help. Retard, was a word frequently tossed in his direction, and even though I made numerous attempts to quell the flood of children's cruelties toward one another, Barry could not help but be further diminished by his classmates' low opinion of his academic performance.

Remembering what I had learned in Education 423: Teaching Strategies in Math, I studied Barry's papers, trying to make sense of the kinds of errors he was making. But the more I studied his errors, the more a pattern eluded me. There seemed to be no pattern to his errors, no consistency to what he knew or did not know. It was as if a different child was turning in the papers each day. If he knew the sum of $2 + 3$ on Monday, there was no guarantee that he would do that sum correctly on Tuesday. His responses shifted so radically, I began to think he might just be wildly guessing. On the other hand, maybe the "math chip" in his brain had been rendered dysfunctional. I had heard in my college classes of children who had reading disabilities, but I hadn't heard about children with math disabilities. I tried to remember what I knew about learning-disabled children, but given that he could function, albeit in a marginal way, in reading, I was totally mystified as to what the problem might be.

Mrs. Newhouse, Barry's mother, lost no time in coming to school for a visit. She brought with her the diagnostic assessments made in the educational clinic of the large coastal city, where she had taken Barry for an evaluation last year. Barry had been given a battery of tests, and the clinical results seemed to me ambiguous. He was given an individual IQ test, and scored 80.1 interpreted that to mean "low average." This, in itself, would not explain his math difficulty. He could read and comprehend at a fourth-grade level and he did seem to be making at least some gains in this area, although they were slow. The tests revealed that his math functioning was "poor," but there was no indication of where the problem came from. The report from the clinical psychologist suggested that Barry showed no indication of "psychological problems that might interfere with his learning." The speculation seemed to point in the direction of low IQ as the causative factor, but the professionals at the clinic were better at explaining what he couldn't do, rather than why he couldn't do those things. Since I already knew what he couldn't do, and needed to know more about why, the diagnostic assessments were not very helpful. I began to intuit that maybe there was some physical dysfunction that was outside the scope of the clinic staff's ability to detect. Could there have been a birth defect? Might there be some genetic malfunction? Were there infant or early childhood experiences that put him at risk? Had his mother taken drugs or alcohol during pregnancy? None of these lines of inquiry had been pursued by the clinic staff. And if the educational clinic in the city struck out for me, the resources at the school district level were even less helpful. Diagnostic services at the school and in the county were few and far between. I could make a referral, but it would be months until any information would be forthcoming. And would the results be any more illuminating than what I already knew? I could try it, but in the meanwhile, Barry was still sitting there in my class, being defeated by the simplest numerical tasks.

Mrs. Newhouse wanted something different from me. She was not concerned with finding out more about Barry's difficulties with his schoolwork. She seemed to have already accepted as a given that he had these academic limitations. What she wanted was some reassurance that this new teacher (me) would be sympathetic to the learning problems of her only son. Would this
new teacher work with him, to the best of his ability? Would she see any value in him as a person, outside of his limited academic performance? Would she use his academic failings to further undermine his confidence in himself? Would he, at the end of sixth grade, be more convinced than ever that he was a capital-F Failure, ready for the garbage heap? I looked out of the classroom window to the schoolyard where Barry was waiting for his mother, shooting baskets. Pity, I thought, that basketball could not substitute for math on his report card. Then he would be "gifted" instead of a "retard."

I was touched by Mrs. Newhouse's plight. She cared deeply about her son and was hoping for some magic, something that could happen in sixth grade that would not propel him further down into a sea of hopelessness as a learner. But I didn't want to build up her hopes. I wanted to tell her: "Look here, I'm only a first-year teacher! What do I know about how to help him? Even the professionals at the educational clinic bombed out when it came to pointing to what was wrong! How can I succeed where all his other teachers failed?" I wanted to tell her all of that, but I could only look into her eyes, filling with tears, and assure her that I would do whatever I could. I spent the weekend thinking about Barry. And even though I tried to get him out of my mind, he was never far from my thoughts.

Remembering what I learned in my coursework—that the use of manipulatives in math would increase comprehension as well as skills—I approached the first-grade teacher on Monday morning to ask her for some Cuisenaire rods. This seemed to me to be the right way to begin work with Barry. I sat with him, dumped the rods out on his table, and showed him how he could use the manipulatives as an aid in calculation. He took the rods from me, with a look on his face that told a story, but I could not read it.

I saw him pushing the rods around on his desk as he worked on the math worksheet I had given him, with ten simple addition facts to sum. His paper, however, was no different from those that I had seen before: the pattern of errors that made no sense persisted. I blue penciled "two correct out of ten" with a heavy heart. The next day, when I looked over to Barry's desk, I saw that the rods were nowhere in sight. "Where are your rods, Barry?" I asked when I approached him. Barry looked at me, his eyes blazing with open hostility, as he reached into the inner recesses of his desk and drew them out. Three days, three rod-instruction periods, and three worksheets later, we were still at square one.

The following Monday, I decided I'd give it one more try.

"Hey, Barry. Take out the rods and let's do some math."

Slowly, as though he were swimming through glue, he began to extract the bag of rods from his desk. I pulled a chair over to him and got a good look at that cold, hard face. It didn't take many questions to find out the trouble. Cuisenaire rods were for babies. I had publicly humiliated him with my choice of hands-on materials. Never mind that we had used them in my college course in math methods. Everyone at this school knew they were only used in the primary grades. Why didn't I just put a dunce cap on his head and be done with it! Numb with shame, I took the sack of rods from Barry and retreated to a neutral corner where I could assess my losses.

After dinner, I opened a bottle of wine and had two glasses before I sat down to rethink my next moves with Barry. If rods were for babies, I had to find some other manipulatives that would be
more appropriate. They needed not just to help him conceptualize numbers, but to restore his
dignity. I decided on money.

I put together a bag of coins, about five dollars' worth in pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters,
and told Barry that this would be his bag of money. "Barry's money," the other kids called it. No
one could say that these manipulatives were for babies. He began to use the money as counters.
Each day, he and I would put together a group of 10 arithmetic examples requiring him to add
and subtract money. At the end of the day, he'd turn his worksheet into my "in basket" for
marking.

His score of correct responses was fairly consistent, usually three or four out of ten, with five
correct being a major event. If there was a consistency about his low score, there still was no
discernible consistency to his pattern of errors. Working with him one-on-one on a daily basis
did not increase his ability to compute or to comprehend these basic numerical concepts in any
significant way. In the evenings, at the dining room table where I read students' work with my
after-dinner coffee, I tried to think of what I might write on Barry's paper that would not
demean him further, that would not destroy the remaining vestiges of confidence that he had in
himself. I could not be false and write that his paper was good work because it was not good
work; that would have been a lie.

If I wrote that, why would he ever trust me again? If I wrote, "You are trying," that, too, could
be seen as a reproach. It sounded too much like, "You are trying, but not succeeding." I couldn't
think of something to write that would be honest as well as supportive, encouraging and
validating.

In a move that no teacher in any education course ever taught me, I picked up my gum eraser and
rubbed out a few incorrect digits in Barry's answers. Deviously, I selected a matching pencil,
forged his handwriting, and put the correct digits under the examples. Would he know? Would he
remember the answers he had put down? Would such a lying, cheating maneuver doom us both?
I poured a shot of brandy into my coffee cup, picked up my blue pencil, and wrote, "Hey, Barry.
Eight correct today! You are really making some big improvement in your work." I downed the
coffee-brandy in a single gulp.

I played out this scenario with Barry for the next few months. Barry, despite extensive one-on-
one instruction, practice with his bag of manipulatives, and math worksheets, never learned to
master computation with increased accuracy. I continued each evening to erase and change his
incorrect answers so that I could return his paper with a response that validated Barry-as-
person. I never breathed a word of this to anyone in school.

In the early days of spring, three boys from another class came into the after-school disarray of
my classroom to hang out and talk with some of my "hangers-on." I heard them talking from
where I was putting together a photo display for the bulletin board.

"Who's the dumbest kid in your class?" one of them asked.

Larry looked up from what he was doing and looked over at Mark, who liked me to call him
"Bob," and said, shrugging his shoulders, "I don't know."
It would be nice if Barry’s story had a happy ending. But the truth is, I left the Twin Pines School at the end of that school year to take a job in the city, near my family and friends. I lost touch with Barry altogether. Did he ever get through high school with any shred of his self-worth intact, even though he could not do his numbers? Is self-worth a reasonable price to pay for the inability to add and subtract? Maybe a college coach picked him up, got him a basketball scholarship, and gave him a free ride through the academic requirements? Did I do the right thing with Barry, choosing to bolster his feeling of self-worth rather than giving him a correct and earned mark? If I teach for 100 years, I'll never know for sure.