

## EASE ON BY NEW YORK SCHOOLS: AN IMMIGRANT'S GUIDE ON SURVIVAL

**John Kung**

“Don’t leave me alone!” I screamed silently and in Chinese. I was nine years old, left alone in the principal’s office one September morning. I had just gotten off the boat, so to speak. Spoke not a word of English. I was thrust into the third grade, one grade lower than for my age, to help me adjust easier. *Nothing would have made anything easier.* My family did not have the foresight to teach me any English, not even a few simple phrases. I don’t blame them. They were poor and with so many challenges to meet, like escaping communist China (that’s a whole ‘nother story), we did not think of learning English. The subject never came up. This was our first time leaving our country. China calls itself the *Central Country* because it sees itself as the center of the world. We’re the big enchilada, everyone had to modify their world views to fit into our culture, a process called accommodation (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969)<sup>1</sup>. We literally swallowed up barbaric invaders like Ghengis Khan and the Mongolians and they became Chinese. We never had to adjust to others. Who would’ve thought America would speak a different language?

So here I was, abandoned in the principal’s office by my father. There was no translator, bilingual teacher nor minority advocate present. There wasn’t a Chinese face in the room, or in the whole school for that matter, except for my sister. My father’s philosophy was “sink or swim.” This was P.S. 125. I was led to numerous crowded classrooms but each time I was rejected, not knowing the classrooms may be over-crowded. I had to be led back to the principal’s office. By this time the fear, the rejection, the embarrassment caught up to me. I didn’t want to cry because I was going to grow up to be a man. The tears came none-the-less.

I picked up the English language quickly enough, at least the

version spoken in a black school in a black neighborhood. Thank God they were not pushing for bilingual education then. Total immersion into the English language was the best thing for me.

This was Harlem, 1960. At that time, there seemed to be no other oriental in Harlem except for the Chinese couple who ran the local hand laundry. Talk about blacks being a minority. I was a minority within a minority. On top of that, my family was poor and illiterate in the English language, my father a laborer, and we fell into the working or lower class, discriminated against by everybody.

Any number of these above characteristics should predict school failure, if one listens to radical theorists who insist educational inequalities are due to SES, social economical status and other minority traits (Sadovnik, 2001)<sup>2</sup>. Several things I remember at my first public school: We took naps in the afternoon (oh, how I miss them); the teacher was white; all the students were black, and my sister was attacked for wearing a blouse with the wrong color, a color that a gang of schoolgirls claim was theirs. This became one of several reasons why I recommended school uniforms in later years.

### **P.S. 101**

We moved to East Harlem after 2 years. I changed to P.S. 101 and a new neighborhood. The striking difference in this new location is that now I am in the midst of a large number of Puerto Ricans and Italians. However, the classrooms were still predominantly black. The others must have gone to Catholic schools for there were several around.

Across the street from where we lived, there were two ethnic clubs right next to each other, one Italian, one Puerto Rican. Regular fights would break out every weekend. My first indication of serious racial tension.

I was pretty good in Arithmetic. Always got the top grades in tests. The arithmetic on these tests was old hat to me, stuff I mastered when I was in the first grade in China. I became known as the best

math student in the class and this helped me to ingratiate myself with a group of strong black boys in the class. They were not exactly in a gang with initiation rites and all. But they were “tight” (meaning close). I became a friend and they took me in as a “brother.” This turn of events boded well for me because in addition to being an underclass, I was short, skinny, underweight, speech-challenged and ugly (even my own mother gave me the last description). I was a good target for bullies. But the kids in the schoolyard knew I was part of this group of tough boys, who would stick up for me when someone tried to bother me. It was a heck of a protection. And it preempted a lot of fights. However, when I was alone and not with my friends, I felt vulnerable. Thank God for Tae Kwan Doe and later Bruce Lee. You see, among many black boys, there is a stereotype that Orientals know martial arts. This served me well for a number of years. To demonstrate that I knew the art, I learned a simple *kata*, a preliminary set of moves before engaging in a karate fight. I did it with elaborate, purposely exaggerated movements, accompanied by a loud shout. It works when your opponent is alone. Never try it when going against a group, especially if you really don’t know martial arts, as was my case.

Little children are colorblind. Growing up with black kids, I did not see myself any different from them. Once my friends and I were watching a movie with a stereotypical Chinese person in it. He was a servant with buckteeth and Kowtowing to every one. My friends told me that I was going to grow up to be like that. Imagine the shock I had. I worried the whole day, trying to come to terms with that prospect.

The English language was always difficult for me. I mean *standard written English*. There were many moments too embarrassing to mention. Once I saw a sign in the supermarket “sugar free.” This was the time when they first introduced sugar free sodas. They did not call them diet sodas then. By coincidence, although I didn’t think it was at the time, there were bags of granulated sugar on the nearby shelf. So I brought the soda and a 5-pound bag of granulated sugar to the counter and the clerk was about to charge me for the sugar when I insisted the sugar was free since the sign indicated that in aisle 4. I

was called a “wise” guy and asked to return the sugar. I not only got reprimanded but also got the first taste of sarcasm. Someone explained to me that a “wise guy” is not really wise, nor really stupid, it’s just not a compliment. Actually, it was derogatory. This may all seem pathetic, but for a young immigrant, not knowing the intricacies of English, it was confounding. What is the big difference between “sugar free” and “free sugar” anyway?

I had similar problems with “don’t get smart.” I always thought we were supposed to get smart. Why attend school if you don’t? Among my friends, they started to say “bad” for things that are exceptionally good (I am sure they were not the first to coin the phrase). For example, if someone saw a terrific movie, he would describe it as “bad.” Likewise, something that is “hot” would also be “cool” and vice versa. All my friends wanted to be a basketball star, so did I. But I was told I had a slim chance.

Others told me I had a fat chance. Same difference. Even the president talks gobbledygook. One time Bill Clinton said that the country was “in a funk.” The next year he said the country was “out of funk?” Go figure. We all know the difference between consistent and inconsistent. What about valuable and invaluable?

However, my English took a giant step in the 5th grade. The English teacher taught us phonics. She had a song or rhyme to go with putting all the consonants with each of the vowel: b a, bay, b e, bee, b i, bitibye, b o, bow, bitibye bow b u, b(ea)u, bitibyebowbeau. Then c a cay (pronounced say), c e cee...etc. We had fun singing along. She also gave us a long word to see if we could come up with many other words using only the letters in the given word. Often we had a little competition to see who can come up with the most words, with the winner getting a small prize that usually involved sweets or stationary. Of course, the winner was always praised. I never did like candy much but the stationary was nice. But I really thrived on praise. It was good to be recognized especially by a teacher we all loved. I did not know it at the time but the teacher was practicing classic operant

conditioning with multiple reinforcements. In any case, this encouraged us to use the dictionary and we learned many new words by this method. I was very diligent in this game because I could compete and I got great satisfaction for the attention and recognition that I got for being good at this game.

Martin Luther King was assassinated around this time. Race riots broke out, stores were looted. Once I was on a street where someone smashed the windows of a sports store. A school mate said, “come on, the windows are broken, let’s just grab something and run before the police comes.” I remember questioning myself whether I should or should not. I searched my gut feeling for some innate moral conviction that would persuade me not to steal. It wasn’t there. I discovered that *morality is not innate*. What prevented me from stealing was partly fear of the unknown but mostly because of my recollection of my mother’s admonition: *You must not steal*. I was always impatient with my mother’s constant lecturing, but now I am grateful for them in hindsight.

### **Junior High - Saint Francis de Sales**

My Junior High School was in a mixed neighborhood. This was my first introduction to many different races in the classroom. Instead of all black, we had Puerto Ricans and whites! However, since this was a Catholic Junior High, discipline was in order. The nuns of the order of Sacred Heart would not tolerate bad behavior. Because they expected us to follow rules, we did. This was a case of self-fulfilling prophecy (Rist, 1977)<sup>3</sup>. These teachers were serious and taught to the text, no horsing around. I began to learn at a faster rate, because there were tests and other competitive exercises.

I made friends with a boy from Dominican Republic. I learned how to eat platonos (i.e. plantains) with butter and eggs. Also I learned the sadness of divorce. He missed his daddy and could not concentrate on his studies. Fathers are frequently portrayed poorly in this society (Watch “The Simpsons” TV show and you will know what I mean).

In most cases, the courts are predisposed to award custody to mothers rather than to fathers. A father has more emotional import than most people realize, especially for their sons (Dobson, 2001)<sup>4</sup>. Even for daughters! I recall reading a story of a girl who “lost” her father through a divorce. The story was told through a social worker who came to visit the family 15 months after the divorce. The daughter received only one letter from her father during that time. But she treasured the letter and read it over and over again. You could tell because the pages were all dog-eared. Even the father did not know how important he was in the life of his daughter.

This story made an indelible mark on me. I realized that you can learn and emotionally experience the full impact of what you read without having to go through the experience yourself. This is known as vicarious learning.<sup>5</sup> How powerful the written word is. Sure it is good to be original, as this society is keen on, but we will short change our students if we don’t introduce to them the wealth of knowledge, experience and lessons that can be gained from reading classics and other good literature. I also learned that divorce is one of the most devastating event in anyone’s life, especially for the children.

In my eighth grade, I was selected among 4 students for the Cardinal Spellman Scholarship to attend a mostly all-white high school in midtown Manhattan, Xavier High School, a Catholic High School. I still don’t know why I was picked except for perhaps racial diversity. The other three were black, white and Puerto Rican. Since I was the only oriental in the school, I “lucked out” (or is it “lucked in”?)

### **High School - Xavier ROTC Military High School**

Major changes here. In those days, Xavier was an almost all white school. Students and faculty were predominantly white. The few blacks there were like celebrities. Here is where I tried to speak white English to be more like my classmates. It was not easy to switch. I find myself speaking in several variations of speech. Educators would call it code-switching (Gleason, 1993)<sup>6</sup>. I was given a quick notice that another word for inquire is “ask,” not “aks,” as all my black friends

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would pronounce it. They were not dyslexic, nor was I. Somehow we learned this pronunciation from each other and it stuck.

I knew this school was going to be a challenge when I learned that 8 books, “classics,” were assigned for reading even before school was to begin. Being such a slow reader, I had no hope of reading them all during the summer. Besides, at my ghetto neighborhood, like all the kids around me, I was too busy to read. What with swimming, bicycling, basketball, and the beach, there was hardly time for anything else.

On the first day of class, we were informed that on the following week there would be a test on the summer readings. My gosh, I didn’t read a single book! The next seven days I was burning the midnight oil and my left cerebrum. Lucky for me, there were “Cliff Notes,” thank God. Most of the assigned classics had been summarized by “Cliff Notes.” The name is apropos because if your were on a cliff as I was, you would need these notes. As it turned out, I pulled an 84 on the test. I also learned that employing mnemonic devices and the constant repetition of reading out loud difficult names, concepts or formulas improved my short-term memory, just long enough for a test. Then as soon as I was given the exam, I would quickly write down the more difficult information on the test paper, leave it there for my reference later when the test question called for such answers.

I never did excel in English or any subject that employs much English, although I always wanted to learn English and even try to force myself to like the grammar but it never ceases to perplex me. For example, with most regular nouns you add an “s” to make it plural. However, for verbs it is just the opposite. That is, you must add an “s” to make verbs singular, not plural. A dog runs but dogs run in packs. He shoots bears, but they shoot horses, don’t they?

At Xavier H.S, I won the McDonald Award for the highest Math grade for the first three years, beating out all the intelligent Caucasian schoolmates. Now, if I could only excel in English....

I had a friend at school who had a great influence on me. His name was George Burns. No, not the actor who played “Oh God.” But he was just as funny. He was a punster and I liked him. He helped me become more interested in words and I literally stayed awake nights trying to figure out his puns and trying a few of my own. This exercise may not have helped me develop a large vocabulary, but it took the fear out of the English language. I felt I could master the language to a certain extent and that gave me confidence. Instead of being embarrassed and paranoid about my grammar and vocabulary, I felt I finally had a minimal command over the language. And that made all the difference in the world.

Even though my English was poor, my Math was good enough to act as a counter weight. Fortunately for me, students are usually graded on a composite of both English and Math scores. In most tests, such as the SAT, my scores would be in the 400’s in English and 700’s in Math. This gained me entry to the school of my choice, New York University.

### **New York University**

Finally I made it to college. Even so, I still had my share of difficulties with the language. Shakespeare used malapropism for drama and effect. Because of my lack of command of the English language, I used it quite unconsciously without realizing that I was being Shakespearean.

It became obvious that I would choose Math as my major. English is not my strong suit, more like a strange suit, but since I like Math, you might say I have an affliction for numbers. I graduated in 4 years. Got a job, with a good starting salary, at a large life insurance company, New York Life, as a computer analyst. Not much English needed there.

### **Network Marketing**

The 70’s were the beginning of multi-level or network marketing

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businesses and many people including myself were attracted by their selling points. Especially where they showed you how you could make millions in a month. Right (tongue in cheek). Of course, you needed a large selling force underneath you which you had to recruit. The great benefit I received from all this was the confidence to talk to people and exposure to the opportunities in the larger business world.

### **A Sabbatical from the secular World**

Around this time, a song on the radio poignantly described my state of mind. The song asked, “is that all there is?” I was not satisfied with my achievements or lack thereof. I had unrealized dreams, such as making a significant contribution to the world. I still had inhibitions. I was in many ways independent, but that was not my priority. I felt there was something more, something more grand and celestial. I sought a higher calling and I followed it. I became a missionary for the next 25 years, traveling to numerous countries and meeting all kinds of people. I engaged in many debates over social, political issues and in defending my faith.

I counseled people, learned to alternately lead and follow. I was exposed to diverse cultures, peoples, nations, and races. I was even thrust in front of people, making speeches and giving lectures on the foundational principles of our religion. It was an exhilarating and gainful experience. I became more confident, less inhibited, and my English improved some more. I realized being exposed to the world and to so many people and ideas made me more broad-minded. I am able to see the big picture. Most importantly, I discovered a few guiding principles of life that serve me well in anchoring down my life and giving it the purpose and direction that I sensed was missing for so many years.

### **Final Frontier**

I am presently very concerned with the lack of character and moral education in schools. Students today don't know right from

wrong (Kilpatrick, 1992)<sup>7</sup>. There are many reasons for that. What is more important is how to solve the problem. From first hand life experience, I believe education is the key to improvement. As a disciple of Confucius (Kung Fu Tse), I believe that an educated man is a moral man (Confucius, 1979)<sup>8</sup>. Most studies show that there is a relationship between moral reasoning and moral behavior (Kohlberg, 1987)<sup>9</sup>, although the strength of relationship varies. Even though people do not always do what they know is morally correct, it's a start. I believe it begins with knowing what is right, then having the conviction that what is right is the best alternative for one's behavior and finally doing what is right. If the knowledge goes from the brain to the heart, i.e. taken to heart, then the person is more likely to act morally. I believe further research is needed to find ways to bridge the gap between knowledge and behavior.

To enhance my ability as an educator, I've begun my master's degree course at Queens College. One principle I learned in my missionary years was called up in my Foundations of Education class. My professor asked, "if a teacher taught but the students did not learn, did she really teach?" The discussion ranged from questioning whether the teacher had the desire to teach to whether the techniques used were really pedagogically sound to whether the fault is with the children not wanting to learn. The debate usually rages over whom to blame. As with many education issues, the answer is not always one or the other. My wholistic approach tells me that there are 3 components in most situations: the beginning, the middle and the end. Sounds like a truism but it helps me resolve many complicated issues. This approach is what I call the principle of "*good motivation, good process, and good results*" or good MPR. This principle demands more accountability, which is always good. All three components must be present and be sound. If one has a good motivation but the action he takes brings bad results, then he must rethink and make modifications. "*The path to perdition is paved with good intentions*" is a quote I remembered from somewhere. The writer must have known that good intentions are not good enough without appropriate results.

Because my standard is that not only the end must be good but the starting point and the process must also be good, there would be no room in this schema for the Machiavellian sophistry of “the end justifies the means.”

In my classroom example, the teacher has to be motivated to teach, her teaching methods must be effective and the students must be motivated to learn and actually learn. Setting up these criteria will be more important to ensure successful education than classroom size, abundance of equipment or even social economic status.

I have a bachelor’s degree from NYU, a master’s from a Theological Seminary and now working on a second master’s at Queens College. I am working at a job I like, making over \$50,000 per year, flexible hours. Is that success? For me, success is measured by three goals: 1) a happy marriage; 2) a large family and 3) the contributions I have made to humanity. I have the first, working on the second, and God help me not to lose the desire and ability to make the third.

All the education I am acquiring is to help me in my third goal. I am trying to be successful but the jury is still out and it will remain out until I have drawn the last breath.

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