

Looking back at the 3Rs

Remember walking into a new class?

By LYNN ORR

Frosty mornings and plaid skirts, slicker-yellow buses and bumpy roads, the odor of burning leaves and sweaters excitedly donned for the first days of school that grew itchy and warm during hot September afternoons.

Those are the images that recreate themselves each fall when the neighborhood kids troop off to school.

My first day of school in Farmington occurred when I walked into a fifth-grade classroom in Gill Road School. Riding the school bus, packing a lunch, and walking into a roomful of strangers were all new experiences for a 10-year-old who had walked to a Detroit school with her childhood friends.

Farmington was different then, in 1956, and Vara Hoekstra was a new teacher in the district. Probably looking out over that sea of faces elicited a similar response of excitement and wariness in her as well. She had taught high school in her native Missouri but she found in fifth-graders the kind of class she likes. Currently, she's finished 34.6 years of teaching all together, the last 21 at Gill Road School, teaching either fifth or six grade. And she still loves it.

THAT'S PROBABLY why I remember fifth grade as my best elementary

class. The flavor of a teacher is still the most essential ingredient in the classroom and Mrs. Hoekstra was, and is, an exceptionally warm and wonderful teacher.

She loves traveling and we learned the states, state capitals and major rivers. She tells me now that she's traveled to every state in the union in the 21 years since I've seen her.

She loves square dancing—"grace and poise"—and I can still do an allemande left with some semblance of flair. Her kids will be square dancing this year, no doubt. I wonder if the girls will feel as self-conscious as we did waiting for a partner to walk across the room.

She loves politics and we learned a lot about the government for a fifth grade class. We had our own elections to capture some of the feeling for the election process and to learn how a group votes. I think we voted out math one day, but we quickly learned that democracy wasn't always working.

She still emphasizes the five Rs—respect, responsibility, reading 'riting and 'rithmetic, and special projects, like creative writing and puppet plays, still take a place in her extensive classroom plans.

I REMEMBER the thrill of directing an adaptation of a Nancy Drew

mystery that our class performed. We wrote the play, made the sets and costumes, and gleefully gave performances to some other grades.

Of course, there are changes. Today's girls wear pants, while I remember wearing skirts, with heavy leggings under the skirts in the middle of winter. I remember Mrs. Hoekstra in flowered dresses, while today she wears pantsuits.

"The dress code for me has changed, and what a blessing," she says, as she sits on the floor to hold up multiplication flashcards for one boy and one girl.

"I'm approaching retirement, and I'm still trying to find out which are smarter, the girls or the boys," she says to her class, with a twinkle in her eye for me. A girl won the day before I visited her class, while Mark Slugerman beat out Melissa Cameron on the day of my visit.

I guess Mrs. Hoekstra always knew that the battle of the sexes was a sure way to get her kids interested in learning.

She says she's more at ease with her students now, although we didn't notice any problems then. During the year her mother died, and the following year her father died.

"It's taken me a number of years to be more relaxed with the children," she says, but teaching continues to be

one of the most important things in her life.

KIDS ARE more aggressive today, she admits, but now that she can legally apply a little body English when somebody pokes a classmate with a pencil, discipline is easier to maintain, she says.

But today's students are more informed and ready to tackle a wider range of subjects, she adds. "Our curriculum is more advanced, and the children are more aware of their surroundings." Television plays a big part in their extended knowledge of the world, she explained.

"Basically I want them to develop an awareness of the society in which they live," she says.

Carl Wilson, who has two years in the district over Mrs. Hoekstra, taught at Bond School from 1954-55 and "came in with the first load of bricks" at Gill, he says.

Wilson agrees with Mrs. Hoekstra that today's children are more aware of the world.

"I think they and we are better than when I first started teaching. Now we want them to learn to think for themselves and we emphasize the world as a unit, with an emphasis on thinking rather than memorizing."

Another changing aspect of education is the importance of physical education, he believes. "These kids are more coordinated, and they can organize a soccer game during recess by themselves, instead of beating each other up."

Wilson shares Mrs. Hoekstra's enthusiasm for square dancing and his dress code has also changed. Whereas I remember him in the room next door in dark blue suits, he now wears light colored slacks and blazer.

The building itself has changed. A new wing and a media center make the old place look completely different. Grannis McCarty, who was principal, retired many years ago, and Frank Kasun has been behind the administrator's desk in the office for 12 years.

From the rear windows, Power Junior High has filled up a vacant field, while the playground remains the same.

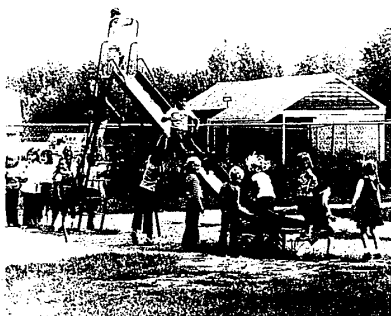
I assume, however, that the first days of school are similar to what they were—a little exciting, a little frightening, and a chance to begin again, no matter what side of the desk you're on.



Wendy Anglin eagerly awaits the result of the daily flash card game as she keeps the tally of who scores.



VARA HOEKSTRA



The slide (above) still gets a lot of play at the Gill Road Elementary School playground. So do the flashcards inside the school (right). The game is "Who gets the answer first?" as teacher Vara Hoekstra holds the flash cards for gamesters Melissa Cameron and Mark Slugerman.



CARL WILSON



Staff photos by Harry Mauthe.



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