

## Chapter 9: Silence of the Lambs



# All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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## Chapter 9: Silence of the Lambs

Almost every time that I attend an educational function, such as a meeting, workshop or conference, I invariably receive a Mae West invitation from educational personnel, “Come up and see me sometime.”

Since I enjoy visiting schools, seeing good teaching, identifying bad instructional practices, and it is very necessary for my work in educational research and development, I usually pursue the Mae West invitations until I can determine a day and time when visiting a school is feasible.

So it wasn’t surprising that I found myself in an elementary school late one morning. The school was in an urban area, with most of the enrollment made up of disadvantaged Mexican American students, many of them with limited proficiency in the English language.

The school did not have a bilingual education program, but most of the kids were receiving special instruction in English as a second language.

By the time the visit was finished it was almost noon, and I received an invitation to have lunch at the school. Nobody in his right mind would classify a school lunch as a gourmet experience, but since it did provide an opportunity to communicate with the school staff, I readily accepted.

As we walked into the cafeteria I was struck by a most unusual characteristic. All school cafeterias are noisy places where even the clatter of dishes and utensils are drowned out by the constant speaking, squealing and yelling of students temporarily released from the constraints of the classroom. This cafeteria seemed as quiet as a funeral, with the clatter of spoons and forks hitting the trays being the only sound in the large room.

“Staff usually sit at the principal’s table,” I was told, “and I have to warn you, he does not like a lot of conversation while we are having lunch.”

I sat at the table with the principal I had just met that morning and about one dozen teachers who had joined him for lunch.

“It sure is quiet in here,” I commented to the principal.

“It sure is,” he responded in a whisper. “I insist that there be no talking in the cafeteria. The children are supposed to come in, get their lunches, eat them, and exit the cafeteria with a minimum of talk. I hold teachers accountable for violations of this policy.”

Although I was dying to find out why absolute silence was desirable, I was afraid that my host teacher would be held accountable for any excessive speech on my part. So I just nodded my head every time the principal made a muted statement.

“Some principals find it hard to achieve this much order in the school, let alone in the cafeteria, but I have developed some techniques which are quite effective.”

“What kind of techniques?” I asked in a whisper. I knew I shouldn’t encourage too much communication, but my curiosity got the best of me.

“See all those tables over there?” he asked as he pointed to groups of students obviously in the higher elementary grades.

Note how the teachers seat their classes with boys and girls in alternating seats. At that age the children are becoming gender conscious, so seating them boy, girl, boy, girl makes the students self-conscious and discourages conversation.”

I looked at them again, and sure enough, not only was there no verbal communication, most of the students were looking down at their plates without even making eye contact with other students.

Having come from a large family where mealtime was the time for extensive recapitulation of everybody's experiences and my father usually used these occasions for relating extensive stories and jokes, I felt very weird sitting through this silent eating ritual at the elementary school. I managed to keep my mouth shut until the end of the meal. As I was leaving, I politely thanked the principal for the opportunity to visit his school.

“You are most welcome. Come back anytime. By the way, do you have any questions about our instructional program?”

“Yes, I do. What do you consider the biggest problem in the education of these children?”

Without hesitation, he replied, “Language. These students do not speak any language. They do not know English, and they do not know Spanish. They are like little animals. Their language development is so arrested that it is almost impossible to teach them anything.”

“I see,” I replied, wondering why he could not see the relationship between speaking and language development.