

LINDA – Fieldnotes – May 12, 2007

Subject: Baby College

Location: P.S. 242 on 122nd Street between 7th and Lenox Avenues
(aka Adam Clayton Powell and Malcolm X Blvds)

Time: 9:38 – 1:20

[These notes are written up on Sunday, May 13, one day after the event.]

On my way to PS 242, I passed another public school where a man is teaching elementary school children to play tennis. I note that this is Saturday morning, and wonder what other programs are happening. I had passed this school before, on my way to the North General hospital. Next time I will note its location.

I passed the Baby College Office at 122nd St and Powell. Three women were standing outside, 2 with strollers. One commented on an attractive young woman walking by with a young man just in front of me, saying something about her shoes and “pretty toes.” The young woman had a slim but not skinny body framed by a fitted white eyelet summer blazer, a black and gray striped shirt underneath, and tight trendy dark skinny jeans bunched at the ankle over black stilettos with a strap in the back. In contrast, the women outside Baby College were plump, two of whom were much larger, dressed in cotton polo shirts and t-shirts and jeans, with sneakers. [I felt that the comment was admiring and not at all catty, and that it highlighted the contrast between “dressed for display” and dressed for functionality.]

I turn the corner and draw near a young woman walking slowly toward the school. She turns around and waves. When she comes closer I recognize Kimberly Hearn. She is wearing a dark blue boat-neck cotton shirt with $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves, tan cotton pants, and shiny bronze open-toed wedge sandals. She is carrying a brown leather bag. She greets me warmly and says something that conveys anxiety about waiting. I anxiously check the time: 9:38, so I’m on time. [Perhaps she simply did not want to wait alone?] Meanwhile, the three women from the Baby College office wheel their strollers into the public school. Instead of taking the ramp, they turn the strollers backwards and drag them up the three short steps into the building.

Kimberly tells me that Betina won’t be here today, but Brenda is also coming. I haven’t met her, right, I ask. Kimberly explains that Brenda is a doctoral student at Teachers College and has worked on other project at Harlem Children’s Zone. I tell Kimberly that I got to read the newsletter that focuses on Baby College.

Brenda walks up soon after I arrive. She is very petite, about 5’2” with a very slight build. Her long wavy brown hair is styled to curl away from her face, and she has very light skin, bordering on porcelain. She is wearing light gray slacks and a button-down shirt with $\frac{3}{4}$ sleeves, and light green, gray, white, and skinny pink stripes. Her shoes are beige slides with tapered heels, and her dark red pedicure looks fresh. She is carrying the

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Teachers College messenger bag. [Later I look at Kim's toes, and they have fading opalescent polish.]

I am wearing a white linen blouse with short sleeves, brown slacks, and red Mary Jane shoes. I am carrying a black fabric bag. [I worried about looking professional and looking too posh, so I switched from my usual red leather bag to the black fabric bag.]

We talk briefly outside. Kimberly tells us there is not a protocol yet, that we will be doing observations today. Brenda is to go to a Spanish-speaking class, and Kimberly and I will attend a class together. Abasi, the assistant director of the program, will assign us to a class. She tells us that Marilyn, the director, is on vacation.

Inside the school is very lively and noisy. A long line, mostly women with strollers or small children, wait to approach several tables laid end-to-end. People in bright blue t-shirts that read "Harlem Children's Zone" man the tables, chat with people in line, stand around, and walk around. A white man in a brown t-shirt and jeans is walking around with a large camera. A cafeteria, whose glass doors are propped open, is buzzing with parents, children, and HCZ workers eating, talking, and walking around. Later, when I pop in, people are eating muffins and apples, what Kimberly calls, "healthy food."

We speak briefly with Abasi Clark, who is the assistant director of the program. He is tall, perhaps about 6' 3", and husky. He is wearing the bright blue HCZ shirt and black pants. He has long thick dreadlocks tied behind his head and dark skin. He draws back when he sees us, as if he is surprised. He says, "Everyone's here today."

Kimberly introduced us by name. [I wish I remembered if she mentioned Teachers College.] She tells him we're here to observe, and asks if we can be placed into classes. He agrees. Brenda asks if there are always so many people, and he tells us that since this is the second week, there are a lot of people. Last week was orientation, he explains. By the fourth week, we *know* who will be in the program, and the process moves much more quickly. At some point he tells us that he was on vacation last week. I ask some questions, I can't remember what, and he answers them.

Kimberly leads Brenda and me into the auditorium, which has a stage in front, a large block of seats down the middle, and two sets of seats on each side. She explains that in the past, one side has been reserved for Spanish speakers, the other for French, with English in the middle. The auditorium is empty save for a woman is pattering around the stage. On the stage are chairs set in a U-shape facing a pad of paper [which probably was set on an easel.] The stage is raised about 3.5 feet, and the seating starts high and gently slope downward towards the stage. The chairs are wooden. We walk to the first row on the left facing the stage, and unfold the seats. Brenda takes the seat closest to the stage. When Kim unfolds the chair next to Brenda, it has bits of a pink sticky substance that looks like gum. She unfolds the next chair, and again it has bits of gum stuck to it. She takes the third chair, and I sit next to her.

Alternately turning from me to Brenda, Kimberly explains that they start in the auditorium and then break into classes. I ask what the classes are, and she tells us prenatal, newborns-12 months, 1 year old, 2 year old, Spanish, and one for young mothers under 18. Apparently, the older mothers wanted to tell the young women what to do. I joke that everyone has advice for new mothers, implying that this is annoying, and Kimberly adds, especially teenagers. Kimberly tells us that the cameramen are from Oprah, that Oprah's going to do a feature on Baby College. I make suitably impressed noises, and ask if the mothers are being told. Kimberly does not know. I can't remember how I started blabbering about how this is the only industrialized country to spend less on kids in low-income communities and how HCZ is making up some of that deficit. I apologize and say I have some opinions on this subject. Kimberly says, that's ok. [Later I feel that I am still trying to prove myself, which of course can backfire.]

The three of us keep chatting, mostly about Baby College. Kimberly says they should start soon, that they serve breakfast from 9:30 to 9:50, but it is well past 10 by the time we eventually lapse into silence.

[Section added May 14]

Part of what we talked about was the way in which HCZ tries to keep its families within the net. Kimberly told us that once the families enroll in Baby College, they also recruit them to the Harlem Gems program (for pre-kindergarteners) and then to the Promise Academy. Since the Promise Academy has to be open to all children in New York, but also aims to serve the Harlem community, they have a lottery just for the kids in the Baby College/Gems programs when they are 3 years old. In response to my questioning, I believe Kimberly said that this lottery is not publicized to non-Harlem parents. The spots left over from this initial lottery are then offered to the wider public.

Kimberly also wondered aloud if there would be a class inside the auditorium, on the stage.

I ask if I can walk around, and Kim says yes, but not without looking alarmed for a moment. She says I can ask Abasi. I walk out of the auditorium's main doors and through the line of women. I approach the tables and see them signing blue and pink forms. I stand next to a young man who is standing at the front door, facing the tables. "A lot of people," I remark to him. He agrees and says, "More still coming." He doesn't seem to want to chat, so I leave.

On the next table are name tags printed on sticky labels. HCZ-shirted workers have printed lists, presumably of names, on stapled sheets of paper. There are also pink brochures on the table with two blue tickets attached, the kind that come in a large roll and are used for small drawings and carnival rides. I see one HCZ-shirted woman who does not seem to be busy, and I ask her if I can take one of the flyers, a crumpled one with no tickets attached. Of course, she tells me, and we begin a conversation.

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I tell her I'm working with HCZ to observe, and she says welcome. She explains that the women are signing a waiver to be on the Oprah show, and then signing in. She tells me that since this is only the second week, there are a lot of new people still coming. Her name is Francisca, pronounced Fran-ches-ka, and she has brown hair with blond streaks tied back in a short ponytail. She is about 5'2", with a square build. I ask if she's an instructor, and she says no, she's a floor worker, she "does a little bit of everything." She seems pretty happy about that.

I ask how she started working with Baby College and she tells me that when she was working with a welfare program (not clear if she was also receiving welfare benefits), they suggested that she volunteer with Rheedlen (HCZ's former name). She eventually got offered a part-time job managing the Food Bank, where they give food away to needy families, and she jumped at the chance. Ten dollars an hour, she told me. Eventually she was offered a full-time position at Baby College. She wants to become a social worker, she tells me, and is going back to school. Wow, I say, and she jokes, even though I can retire in a few years. I tell her I don't want to take too much of her time, and excuse myself to join Kimberly and Brenda, who are talking with a man in a suit in front of us.

Kimberly introduces me to Mr. Calhoun. We are standing in a line rather than a knot, so as not to get in the way of the people moving around, which means that at the end of the line, I can't hear anything that Mr. Calhoun and Kimberly are saying. I ask Brenda who he is, and she says that he's one of the top people at HCZ. I quickly get bored and leave to peek into the cafeteria. Two HCZ-shirted young men are standing around, so I start talking with one of them. I remark that a lot of people work here. He says they are short-staffed. He says something that I understand as, the staff members who are here were called in and told they'd be short-staffed. When a third young man in a HCZ shirt comes up and starts joking around, I take my leave. The people in the cafeteria are being directed toward the auditorium, through a side door, so I walk with them. In the hallway towards the side door, an older woman wearing a HCZ shirt stops two women walking together. She tells the one with a handwritten nametag that this program is for mothers and grandmothers. Do you have a baby, she asks her. The young woman says no. The HCZER repeats that she needs to be a mother or a grandmother, then walks away. [It's not clear whether she's asking her to leave. The young women look confused, then continue into the auditorium.]

I walk into the auditorium behind them. Brenda and Kimberly have reclaimed their seats. The three seats next to Kimberly are all occupied, by two women and a small child, who looked to be around 2 or 3 years old. An older woman sits next to the wall. She is wearing a red-and-gold print garment. It covered her upper arms and legs down to her shins, and to my untrained eye looks shapeless. Her hair is wrapped in a black cloth and she wears large gold braided hoop earrings. A younger woman next to her wore a light pink polo shirt over jeans. She had a stroller with a small baby inside. The child, who wore her hair in thin cornrows, sat between her and Kimberly.

I went to the second row. A woman standing in the first seat asked if I wanted in, and I said yes. I sat behind and to the right of Kimberly. A HCZ worker came up to the people seated in front of me and told the mom that her child needed to go to childcare. She doesn't want to go, the mom told the outreach worker, she's scared. The worker, who was wearing a sort of bib with 3-D organs sewn onto it (lungs, heart, liver, stomach, intestine) crouched down and started telling the child what fun they were going to have. Eventually the youngster took her hand and walked with her out of the auditorium, with her talking to the child the entire time.

[Rest of notes written up on May 14]

I ask the mother if I can take the seat vacated by her child, and she agrees. After I move to the seat, I tell her that I am working with Harlem Children's Zone and doing some observations. She asked if the school took five-year-olds, and I said yes. I told her I didn't know much about the school, but, gesturing toward Kimberly, I said she could ask her. She motioned toward Kimberly and said, ask her if I can get an application. I asked Kimberly, and she gave me the number to HCZ and told me that the receptionist would direct her. I wrote down the number and "Harlem Children's Zone" in my notebook. Kimberly also told me that she could ask any one of the outreach workers as well. I tore out the piece of paper with the number on it and gave it to the mother. She thanked me.

A HCZ worker, a thin male with long dreadlocks, asked the women sitting next to us if there was a reason they were sitting there. He explained that only people who did not want to be filmed on Oprah were to sit on the sides of the auditorium. The women obligingly stood up and wheeled the stroller to seats in the middle. They left the stroller in the aisle and sat approximately 4-5 seats in from the right side. He then told them that strollers "need to go in the back. You can't have this here." He wheeled the stroller to the back of the auditorium, where a line of strollers were arranged behind the last row of seats.

Abasi then welcomed everyone, talking over the noise into a microphone. I couldn't hear much, as people were still getting settled and I was busy looking around the auditorium. I noted that there were a few men present (other than the outreach workers) and at least 2 "multiracial" couples, both with black men. One woman appeared to be white, slim with short red hair cut in a pixie style. The other woman appeared to be Latina. I did not take notes on her appearance or what made me think she was Latina.

Abasi then introduced Lavin [sp?], the woman with the organ apron, and she told the crowd to pass their kids to a child care worker. Some complied immediately, but I noticed that the woman who had been seated next to me held onto her baby. Lavin then led the group in the Hokey-Pokey song.

You put your right hand in, you put your right hand out, you put your right hand in, and you shake it all about. You do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around, that's what it's all about!

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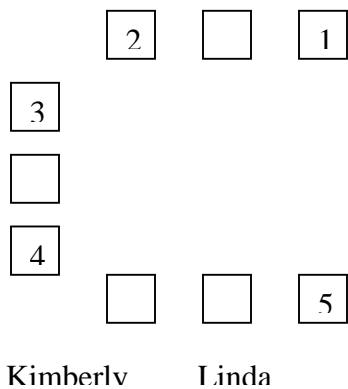
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Lavin demonstrated as she sang into the microphone. During the part where “you turn yourself around,” she stopped singing as she danced in a circle. Some people continued to sing. Others moved their lips but did not move their bodies, and others simply stood. Later, when Kimberly asks Brenda what happened with the Spanish speakers, she reports that people eventually caught on by watching the other moms.

Lavin then asked the audience, “Did you guys see letters?” [I did not notice until I looked, later.] Audience members called out, “D-E-F-G.” Lavin asked the audience to name words that started with those letters. Audience members called out, mostly inaudibly to me, and she repeated, “Dog.” She asked for E words and repeated, “egg,” “eye” and with a little bit of fanfare, “examination.” The call for F words produced “fantastic” and “fish.” [I did not hear what happened with G, if she asked for G words.]

The audience is dismissed to class without any public announcement of where classes are. [Perhaps people know where they are going, or they were told when they signed up?] Kimberly sends Brenda to find the Spanish class. Brenda approaches Francisca. Kimberly asks Abasi to assign us to a class. “Oh yeah,” he says, and thinks aloud, “I’m trying to think which class isn’t too full.” He asks Robert to take us to Russell’s class for 1 year olds. He looks around for Brenda when Kimberly says she sent her to the Spanish class. He asks if we have anybody who speaks French, because they also have a French class.

At 11 am we arrive at Mr. Russell’s class in Room 127. Several women are already sitting in the metal folding chairs arranged in a U-shape over a rug in a corner of the room. Mr. Russell is chatting and joking with them. Kimberly attempts to settle outside the U, and Mr. Russell tells us to join them. To protect the identity of the participants, I have not recorded their names and identified them instead by number.



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Mother #1 is young, later tells us that she is twenty. She has dark skin, straightened hair hanging past her shoulders, and watches the others attentively. She is wearing a black jacket over a pink shirt, jeans, and white sneakers. Mother #2 is also young but looks older than #1. She has light skin, hair pulled tightly behind her head, and smiles and jokes a lot. She is wearing the same white sneakers as #1. Mother #3 is clearly the oldest of the group, possibly in her late thirties. She is dark-skinned, with short straightened hair just

past her chin, and has a rough voice. She is also wearing blue jeans a white belt decorated with metal-ringed holes, and brown and green sneakers. She is also gregarious and smiles a lot, showing several gaps between her teeth [possibly missing teeth]. Mother #4 has wide-set eyes and light skin, and is wearing loose a multicolor pink sweater over a tank top, Capri pants, and flip flops. Kimberly is wearing a dark blue boat-neck cotton shirt with $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves, tan pants, and shiny bronze open-toed wedge heels. I am wearing a white linen short-sleeve blouse, brown slacks, and red leather Mary Jane shoes. I am the only non-African American in the room, and perhaps the only Asian American in the building. Mother #5 also looked to be in her twenties. She had dark skin, and her straightened hair was styled in large soft curls. She wore a polo shirt and jeans with sneakers.

Mr. Russell asks us to introduce ourselves, saying that last time he asked people to introduce one another. He told us to say our names and how many kids we have. Someone asked Kimberly, “You got any kids?” [I think it was Mother #2.] She indicated no. Mother #1 asked me, and I shook my head. “Not yet.” Mother #3 has an 11-year-old, and she has already taken this class. She is bringing her husband, but he couldn’t make it today.

Mother #2, who apparently is new to the class, hasn’t gotten her insurance and immunization records straightened out, and is called in and out of the room. [I find out later that she probably also had to take a pre-test.]

Mr. Russell got us on our feet to do an icebreaker. When he held up the hula-hoop, people started joking that he was going to do the hula. He told us to join hands, and without talking, get the hula hoop around the circle. He put the hula hoop between Kim and Mom #4. Mom #4 raised her right hand, and moved her head under the hula hoop before stepping through. Mom #3 raised her right hand high enough so that the hula hoop fell over her. I can’t remember what Mom #1 did. Mr. Russell used his shoulder to push the hula hoop over his head. Mom #5 repeated what Mom #3 did, and I didn’t raise my hand high enough, hitting my head before Mom #5 raised our hands high enough for me to get under the hoop. Kimberly also raised her hand high enough to get her head safely under the hula hoop. When Mom #2 comes back, Mr. Russell sends the hula hoop around the circle again.

He asks the class why he did this activity, this non-competitive game. One ventures, so we can do it with our kids? He asks us, “Did we all do it the same?” He points out that we watched one another and learned from one another, and still did it our own way. “Do we all parent the same?” he asked rhetorically. He told us that we “modify” the things we learn. He gives the example of how parents used to get the switch, the extension cord. Now we don’t do that anymore. People are nodding as he mentions the switch, the extension cord. [I note that he uses examples familiar to the class.]

He mentions Dr. Brazelton [who I know from reading documents is a pediatrician who helped develop the curriculum].

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When Mr. Russell makes a joke about Mom #1 not being old enough to remember something, she asks people how old they think she is. One guesses 25, another guesses 22. Mom #1 says that she's 20, people are always guessing she's older than she is. Mom #5 says she starts at 20, since "you have to be 20 to be in class."

Mr. Russell sends around a sign-in sheet, which has 33 names on it. Somebody asks Mr. Russell about it. He tells us those are all the people who are supposed to be in this class. I lean over to Mom #5 and ask if last time there were more people present. She confirms this.

Mr. Russell begins with the question, "What do we know about vaccinating our children?"

"They get sick," one person responded. Mom #4 said, "I was reading about it in here," gesturing to the stack of papers on her lap. "And it says they [the babies] have our [the mother's] antibodies. Why do they need antibodies if they have the mother's?" Mr. Russell gave an answer, and took the opportunity to talk about the world getting "smaller," diseases more easily communicable with travel and so on.

"I love these composition books," Mr. Russell tells the class, holding up a black-and-white composition book. "Why?" Talking towards Mom #5, he gestures to Robert, who has been in and out of the room (with and without Mom #2), "If Robert is your doctor, and she's your daughter," gesturing toward me, what is he going to bring? Mom #5 answers, "A stethoscope and a thermometer?" He looks at Mom #1 who answers, "His chart." He talks about the importance of keeping records. Mom #3 holds up two yellow immunization cards.

As Mr. Russell talks about the various vaccines, he sends around a stack of color photos graphically displaying children, babies, and adults with disfiguring diseases. [He had also handed out some brochures, but I did not note when.] In one picture, a man's body is covered with pinkish bumps. In another, a child's hand is covered with rashes, with black fingertips. There is a tiny baby with its head arched back and a tube up its nose. Some pictures have text, telling us they show a 10 year old boy with severe diphtheria, or conjunctivitis, and so on. One picture has the CDC symbol on it.

Talking over construction outside [sounds like drilling], Mr. Russell goes over points written on a chart. The first page explains why vaccines, the second page shows information that parents should jot down when visiting the doctor. Mr. Russell suggests that people should bring someone with them to the appointment to serve as "another set of ears." As he talks, Mom #3 takes notes on the back of an orange flyer. Mr. Russell eventually closes 2 open windows. This lessens the noise level, but there is still another window open behind Mom #3).

he asks people to read the descriptions of the diseases in a color pamphlet produced by the Northern Manhattan Start Right Coalition and funded by the Centers for Disease Control.

- Class
- Land of Make-Believe (childcare room)
- Debrief (Kimberly tells me gently that they've already decided not to record anything for confidentiality reasons, particularly with some acronym like ADC)

Walking with Brenda a few blocks. She is going to the subway, lives in the 160s. We chat about the ambiguity of my position. I say that Betina is rightly protective of the families in the program. She warns that Canada does not allow people to publish at all about these families. She worked with TRUCE, which does multimedia arts with young people.