

**Foreword to *The Naked Children* by Daniel Fader  
Boynton-Cook/Heinemann, Innovators in Education series, 1996**

In introducing the five students who are this book's main characters, Daniel Fader writes, "They were the single most powerful force I have ever known for good change in bad education." We're bringing this book back into print because we need that force now more than ever. We need these five students, as given to us through Fader's vivid and powerful descriptions.

In 1965, Fader arrived at an inner-city junior high school planning to spend the year supervising his experimental program called "English in Every Classroom." This book is an account of that experiment, but it is really an account of Fader's friendship with these five students. Fader realized right away that these students had something to teach him, and because of his gift of insight and storytelling ability, we too can learn what he learned and, like Fader, be forever changed by the experience. What is it like to be poor, black, and in a school where no one seems to believe you'll amount to anything? What do schools need to do differently – and right now – in order to be better places for such kids?

The five students were a force for change, but they were also keenly aware of change's realities. When Fader is disappointed to learn that his program will not continue, Cleo, the leader of the group of students, is surprised that Fader ever thought it would. He'd done some good, she tells him, but "Nobody expected it to last; after all," she said, "nothing ever does."

We're bringing *The Naked Children* back into print because we refuse to believe Cleo is right; we refuse to believe that she and others like her don't deserve more than what they got in that school at that time. Thirty years after Cleo made her observation, and twenty-five years after Fader first brought her and the others to public attention, the charges they make are even more powerfully true. Kids still hide themselves and what they know from schools; schools still fail to *see* the students and so cannot begin to know how to help them. For too many students, school remains boring, humiliating, frightening and disconnected from the lives they live. It's time we listened to what kids are telling us.

There is Wentworth, for example, classified as illiterate, hiding his magazine under his desk so the teacher won't discover he can read. Wentworth, says Fader, "chose feigned illiteracy as his protection against the indignities of school," and if we could truly understand that choice and how schooling forced it on Wentworth, we might be on our way to figuring out how to make such a choice unnecessary for other kids. But here is Wentworth again, this time in a room full of paperback books where he is told he can choose any he wants. This "illiterate" child fills his carton with books, and when Fader notices that one of them is called *The Aliens*, he asks,

"You like Science Fiction, Wentworth?"

"Like what?"

“Books like that one.”

“Don’t know. Ain’t never read this’n.”

“Why did you choose it?”

“Ain’t *aliens* people who don’t belong?”

I can’t read this without feeling chilled – the same chill I feel when Uncle Wiggly, another of the students, is stunned to realize that some people have enough to eat all the time. It is the chill of a truth revealed. If only these kids had not had to go every day to a place that so consistently attacked their honor, their dignity, their intelligence. And yet they teach us not only about what doesn’t work but also about what can work. The school’s reading program doesn’t serve Wentworth, but a huge supply of books about things he cares about does. Adults can’t reach a troubled boy named Sis, but Cleo and Wentworth do. This book offers us a precarious balance of hope and despair, but I believe there’s enough in it to tip the scales on the side of hope.

We’re bringing *The Naked Children* back into print so that these five kids – and Daniel Fader – can once again be forces for change. Cleo’s observations are so right, so on target, everywhere else in the book, but let’s prove her wrong just this once. Let’s show her we can make things better for kids like she was, and make it last.

SUSANNAH SHEFFER