



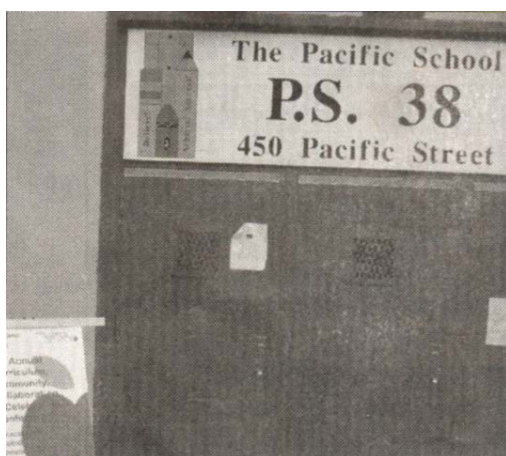
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An Exciting School, and Writing for Kids

By Trudy Whitman

It was a pleasure to enter the halls and classrooms of **P.S. 38** on Pacific Street in Boerum Hill last Saturday for the **7th Annual Curriculum, Community, Collaboration & Celebration Conference**, sponsored by the **Department of Education** and **Teachers Network**. The school is pristine; the hallways are festooned with photographs of students and teachers as well as the children's artwork; and the classrooms give the impression that all who enter are respected members of the community. Even the radiator covers in the stairwells bear messages such as "Innovate!" (I suggest that readers who are tired of seeing media depictions of rundown and dreary public schools and reading articles about the scandals that take place inside them ask for a tour of P.S. 38.)



P.S. 38 in Boerum Hill was the scene of an all-day education conference last Saturday
Photos by Trudy Whitman

It must be said, however, that this country's public schools—particularly those in urban areas—have never been without their problems, and the conference is designed to address these and to celebrate the teachers who work so hard to educate the city's youth.



Children's author Walter Dean Myers with (l-r) teachers Sonia Feliciano and Jackie Rivera and Teachers Network president & CEO Ellen Dempsey

Perhaps reflecting the current intensity of these quandaries was the record turnout for this year's conference—some 500 teachers, administrators, parents, and other concerned citizens registered to listen to presentations and take part in workshops such as "How to Set Up an Effective Classroom," "No Child Left Behind...Here I Stand," "Classroom Management for New Teachers," and "Educating English Language Learners for a Global Community."

The keynote speaker at the conference was New York Times bestselling author **Walter Dean Myers** who has written more than 85 books for children and young adults. His work includes *Fallen Angels*, *Monster*, *Somewhere in the Darkness*, *Slam!*, *Jazz*, and *Harlem*. In a conversation with this columnist before his address, Myers revealed that he never felt that his foster father was happy with his

choice of writing for a living. “It was such a barrier between us,” he observed. It wasn’t until after he died that he realized that it was not disapproval that fueled his father’s attitude; it was the fact that his dad could neither read nor write.



A workshop on the pros and cons of No Child Left Behind drew a large group

Myers began writing as a young boy when a teacher suggested that because of a speech impediment he might find it easier to express himself through writing. When he decided to drop out of school to join the Army at age 17, another teacher implored him not to put down his pen. He never did. After the service he worked at a variety of day jobs and wrote at night, and he started publishing—everything from pieces for the *National Enquirer* to advertising copy for cemeteries. A winning contest entry for the Council on Interracial Books for Children later became his first published book, *Where Does the Day Go?*

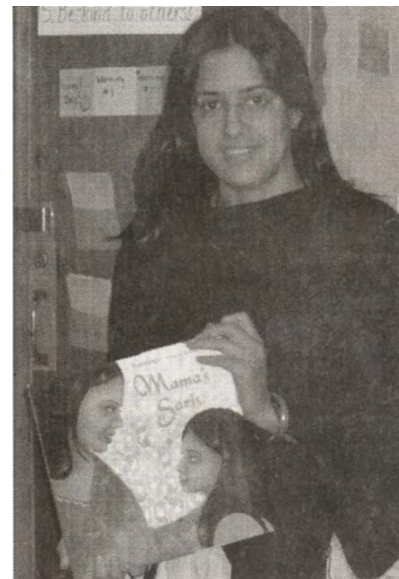
Myers told the group that to interest children in reading, the world they live in must be reflected in what they are asked to read. That world must also be respected; their neighborhood may be rundown and

dangerous, but it is their community—it is where they live and where their grandparents live and where their church is located. “I don’t need to sell out anybody,” Myers stressed. “I must wonder if I’m respecting the life of the child I’m writing about.”

He added that children’s authors are doomed to failure if they sit in an ivory tower believing “*You have to come to me because I write well.*” Writers must study children’s interests: “Give a boy a book about basketball and you can take him anywhere.” Once you secure that interest, he went on, the effective children’s author should “address the larger issues that affect all of us as human beings.” Twenty years ago, Myers wrote a book about the Viet Nam War, during which his brother lost his life. Themes from this early novel were repeated in his latest book just published by Scholastic, Inc., *Sunrise Over Fallujah*. The author said he is weary of our capacity to “reinvent the idea that disagreements can be settled with guns and bombs.”

Walter Dean Myers’s remarks were followed by morning workshops and the opportunity to break bread with ten different children’s authors. I chose to have lunch with **Pooja Makhijani**, an educational content specialist for Sesame Workshop and an adviser for “Galli Galli Sim Sim,” the Indian version of “Sesame Street.”

Makhijani is the editor of the anthology *Under Her Skin: How Girls Experience Race in America* (Seal Press, 2004), and the author of a picture book, *Mama’s Saris* (Little Brown, 2007). Growing up in suburban New Jersey, Makhijani attended a school where she was the only person of color. Her work is inspired by her own life experiences.



Author Pooja Makhijani with her picture book *Mama’s Saris*

Additional workshops and a reception rounded out a very worthwhile day at P.S. 38.

Teachers Network has been working for almost 30 years to connect teachers and enrich their curricula. Professional development, the organization believes, is the key to improving student achievement. To learn more about this international non-profit, visit www.teachersnetwork.org.