

AFTER THE ATTACKS: Young Americans

CITY SCHOOLS

Introducing Children, Gently, to the World's Terrors

to write letters to God. Some scribbled breathlessly as feelings about the last few days tumbled forth; for others, words were much harder to find.

"God, please help me keep my faith," wrote Sophia, a small girl in the front row. "I also hope the people who died are with you. I will also like a sign that the end of the world is not coming."

At the private Calhoun School, a second-grade boy said he had watched television and seen "holes in the World Trade Center" but was not afraid. "It's just TV," he said.

Older children had a somewhat more sophisticated view. At Columbia High School in Maplewood, N.J., students expressed concern about their parents' financial situations, since some worked on Wall Street. And they worried that war would break out and that they would be drafted.

In New York City public schools, attendance, normally around 90 percent, was just over 70 percent. Most downtown schools, which remained closed yesterday, will open today. But below Canal Street, 12 elementary and middle schools and 12 high schools will remain closed, affecting about 15,000 students.

At Trevor Day School, a private school at 88th Street and Central Park West, Jack Dexter, the headmaster, urged teachers to give normal lessons, assign homework and

listen more than they talked, bringing up the terrorist attacks only if students wanted to discuss them. Many students did.

Michaelanne Besch, 17, said she was disturbed to see teenagers playing basketball below her apartment window, as if everything were normal. "This is burned into our brains," Michaelanne said. "I don't think I could come to school and ignore what has happened. It's helpful to be together. It isn't something that happened to me or to you. It's something that happened to the world."

At St. John the Baptist, the students started the day with a prayer service in the church across the street, singing "Jesus Loves Me" and reading psalms. The Rev. Eugene Sheridan assured them that it was all right to be angry, but he asked them to find room in their hearts to forgive the hijackers.

"My final message was that something that happens to the whole world can begin with a disagreement between two people," he said. "So we have to begin by being kind to each other right here in our school."

Back at the school, an eighth-grade class made a giant collage of newspaper photos and headlines that they found especially moving. Phrases like "Funeral Pyre" and "Cavern of Horror" surrounded photos of charred rubble and a sketch of the Statue of Liberty in tears. They hung

it in the hallway, on a wall normally reserved for upbeat poems and essays about career goals.

Sister Mary Ellen Thomas, a social worker who usually counsels adult parishioners, found herself consoling first graders who were afraid that planes would crash through their bedroom windows while they slept and eighth graders who could not stop replaying the collapse of the towers and the throngs of people racing away from the smoke.

"I was frightened, too," she told them. "I didn't know what was going to happen next. I didn't know if you all were going to get home safe."

In the classroom where seventh graders were writing to God, their teacher, Egli Colón, was trying to deal with her own shock. She had been standing at the blackboard and facing the Manhattan skyline when the towers first exploded into flames.

"I just kept the students writing, writing, writing," she recalled in a whisper yesterday. "Anything so they wouldn't look out the window and see what I saw."

As she spoke, a girl named Veronica looked up from her letter and raised her hand. "What kind of people would kill their own selves to kill other people?" she asked. Ms. Colón thought for a moment and shook her head. "There are a lot of questions we can't answer right now," she said softly. "We have to be patient."

At St. John the Baptist School in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, on Monday, when the view out their classroom window still included two shimmering towers, seventh graders wrote their goals for the new year and learned some Spanish words. Yesterday, their teacher asked them