



FROM STUDENTS TO CITIZENS AND WORKERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH MEIER

BY JANICE MOLLOY

You and some colleagues are on a retreat, discussing long-term strategies for your organization. As the hour grows late, someone brings up the issue of future capacity: “What skills are we going to need our workers to have down the line?” People toss out terms like creativity, self-motivation, technical knowledge, the ability to collaborate, flexibility, the ability to learn. Someone else leans forward and asks, “So are kids learning these things in school now?”

Acclaimed educator and writer Deborah Meier has spent more than 30 years thinking about these questions and about what it means to be an educated person in today’s society. As the founder and principal of several inner-city public elementary and secondary schools in New York and Massachusetts, she has made her career helping children in underprivileged communities build productive, meaningful lives.

To Deborah, the core mission of schools in a democracy is producing critical, thoughtful, interesting citizens and workers. From her experience, the current emphasis in the U.S. on standardized testing, as required by the 2001 “No Child Left Behind” Act, stands in the way of achieving that goal. “If Americans had an edge in the world, it was that they were presumably more ingenious, more self-initiating,” she says. “The special American genius was our inventiveness. That spirit of inventiveness is what schools don’t currently reward. It’s not what you’re supposed to be thinking of when you’re taking tests; you’re supposed to be thinking of the rules of the game, not how to break the rules or how to invent new rules.”

Dynamic Learning Communities

Deborah knows about inventing new rules. She became an educator in the 1950s, starting as a part-time substitute teacher in the Chicago public schools while her children were young. During that experience, she found that school was “for many kids irrelevant, and the extent to which it was relevant, didn’t produce lively minds. The same was true for teachers—the environment was barren and sterile. I thought it was amazing that they came to school each day.”

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While teaching kindergarten in Harlem in the early 1960s, Deborah began to work with education professor Lillian Weber of the City College of New York, who developed the “Open Corridor” concept. In it, three or four teachers work together to turn their hallway into a shared children’s space. By collaborating in this way, the instructors demonstrate cooperation and create an engaging and dynamic learning community.

In 1974, Deborah was recruited to apply these progressive ideas in launching the Central Park Elementary School in East Harlem, one of

the poorest areas in the city. The school and three others she spearheaded became highly successful, with more than 90 percent of the students who entered the Central Park East Secondary School going on to college. More than two decades later, Deborah moved to Massachusetts to found the Mission Hill School.

Habits of Mind

The schools that Deborah has launched all share certain characteristics. They are relatively small; the Mission Hill School, with around 180 students, is about one-third the size of the average school in Boston for that age group. Classrooms look like a combination of art room, science laboratory, and library. Children from kindergarten through 8th grade study a common set of themes—American history in the first trimester, ancient history in the second, and science in the third—so that the older students can model certain “habits of mind” for the younger ones.

According to Deborah and her colleagues, these habits are crucial for exercising judgment on complicated matters. At Mission Hill School, developing such intellectual skills is a core part the educational process. They include:

1. **Evidence:** How do we know what’s true and false? What evidence counts? How sure can we be? What makes it credible to us?
2. **Viewpoint:** How else might this look if we stepped into other shoes? If we were looking at it from a different direction? If we had a different history or expectations?
3. **Connections/Cause and Effect:** Is there a pattern? Have we seen something like this before? What

are the possible consequences?

4. **Conjecture:** Could it have been otherwise? Supposing that? What if?

5. **Relevance:** Does it matter? Who cares?

The habits of mind are supplemented by habits of work: meeting deadlines, being on time, sticking to a task, not getting frustrated quickly, listening to what others say, and more.

Because kids learn by seeing adults practice these habits as part of a democratic community, the school operates as a staff collective, with input from a board of directors composed of five teachers, five parents, five people from outside the school, and two students. Most meetings are open to all, including students, who are encouraged to submit proposals. Children then apply these skills to making decisions within their classrooms.

Mission Hill School also brings the classroom into the larger community and the larger community into the classroom. The school has close ties with local museums, a farm, and several sports programs. Older kids participate in a “school to community” initiative, in which they spend one morning a week for 12 weeks working at a nonprofit or business. “The main point,” Deborah says, “is that it’s a place where we know there are some interesting adults doing interesting things who love what they’re doing.” In a similar way, if the students are studying ancient Greece, “we try to find people who have ancient Greek expertise, either as hobbies or professions, so our kids see that there are people who study this all the time and to whom it is a life love.”

For inner-city kids in particular, finding and cultivating a passion can be a lifesaver. According to Deborah, “Over the years, we have gathered a lot of evidence that this approach has had an impact on kids: fewer of them drop out, get in trouble, or despair of their lives. The vast majority go on to post K–12 education; they come to think that having interesting occupations is a possibility for themselves, not just for other people; they are likely to have strong hobbies; they

want their kids to have an education like this too.” She adds, “The other exciting thing is how many teachers come see our schools, hear our stories, and want to start schools like it. We started with just one in NYC and now there are hundreds. The same is true with parents. It speaks to something that we’re longing for in our lives.”

Real-Life Achievement

By law, students at Mission Hill School must take standardized tests, and overall scores exceed those of many other schools in Boston. Nevertheless, the staff doesn’t let test preparation alter the curriculum or the process for evaluating student performance. As a requirement for graduating from eighth grade, pupils present portfolios of their work in different fields of study to committees of five people, including external reviewers, a member of their family, and two members of the faculty. A younger student also sits in as a learning opportunity. The centerpiece of each portfolio is a single, extended piece of work. The committees question presenters and rate the depth and breadth of their understanding of the material. “We are pushing kids to look at themselves as learners,” comments Deborah.

Deborah sees the portfolio process as a better, if somewhat more time-consuming, way of assessing kids’ competence than standardized testing. She says, “Higher test scores are supposed to be a measure of some real-life achievement and yet we have isolated them from real-life achievement.” As an example of this discrepancy, Deborah points out, “Young people who started as students in the seventies—the period in which we started concentrating on testing—are reading precipitously less well than the students who started reading in the forties, fifties, and sixties. If you ask kids, they’ll tell you, ‘When testing is over, we stop reading.’”

Awakening to the Future

So what can we do as a society to ensure that students gain the skills and knowledge they need to be the lead-

ers of tomorrow? According to Deborah, “I think we start off by deciding what’s important to us and how we would know whether we’re achieving what we had in mind.” Another step is to create ways for parents and teachers to get to know each other, through maintaining smaller classes, keeping kids with the same teachers for several years, and scheduling additional time for them to meet. Public policy could support this process by requiring employers to give employees time for visiting their children’s schools. “We could maybe make it a duty of citizenship, like jury duty is,” Deborah comments.

With many educators, parents, and politicians beginning to raise the alarm about the downside of high-stakes testing, Deborah hopes that we’re on the cusp of an awakening that “whoops, this is not what we’ve meant to be doing to children for 20 years, this has nothing to do with what we dream about, this is not what the American future is supposed to be, this is not how to lead a competitive race with the rest of the world.” The fact that the choices we make now will affect our ability to muster an effective workforce and an engaged and thoughtful citizenry well into the 21st century is something that everyone can agree on. ■

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Resources by Deborah Meier

In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization (Beacon Press, 2003)

The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem (Beacon Press, 2002)

Will Standards Save Public Education, series editors Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (Beacon Press, 2000)