

point of view

By Deborah Meier

These past few weeks [Meier is speaking of events in May 1989] have been hard ones for the young people of Manhattan's District 4. Our district is located just north of Central Park, where the recent brutal attack on a young woman runner has attracted national attention. Our school has been gripped by a special sadness because one of the students in our building has been charged with being a party in the attack.

Nothing I can tell you can explain what happened on that terrible evening, but perhaps I can shed some light on the level of violence prevalent in the world of adolescence.

I want to tell you about the problems our students face in their daily lives.

I want to tell you about the impact of schooling on their attitude toward and propensity for violence.

I want to tell you about an alternative approach to schooling that could make a difference.

Most of the young people I see daily are low-income youngsters living in Manhattan's inner city. They are largely African-American and Latino. But their attitudes are not uniquely characteristic of one particular environment. My daughter lives and teaches 100 miles to the north in a small village. She reports the same attitudes and problems of violence — vandalism, rape, arson, drugs, drunken driving. And the 20 percent of students at our school who are white demonstrate a remarkably similar set of values, fears, and experiences.

School is not the place where children learn about violence, nor is it the only place where they might unlearn it. Children generally do not start school until they are 5 or 6 years old. During the next 12 years, they spend only half the days of the year in school — and less than half of those days are actually spent in class.

Furthermore, while kids may experience violence in school, it is not a regular part of their school days. In contrast, it is a daily part of many young people's experiences in their neighborhood, and even in some of their homes. Metal detectors don't safeguard their communities.

Violence is normal in the world of today's adolescent. Even worse, it is glamorous and appealing. When our students let their guard down, they reveal that their ideal of manliness exudes violence. For women, the ideal is to be at once tough and docile. To be a man is to sneer at the weak; to be a woman is to take care of your man's needs. These are ideals they didn't invent — nor did their families or communities.

This attitude is reinforced by everything they see on television and in the movies, in print and broadcast advertising, in the worlds of business and politics. Whether Rambo or a corporate raider, it's the aggressive guy who gets the job done, regardless of laws and societal constraints.

Most teachers and parents, meanwhile, seem to struggle under circumstances that offer no status, glamour, or money. Appearing less admirable to young people, they are less likely to be effective role models.

Families spend a great deal of time, as do teachers, trying to pass on their values. But everything in this adolescent-targeted culture contradicts the school and family's message.

Parents can exert power over their children when they are also able to act as protectors. But when limited resources, time, and energy prohibit them from providing more than the poorest shelter and most meager food and clothing, they are powerless. They dare not say "no" because they fear children will go elsewhere — to more dangerous and lucrative places.

These are not the consequences of style and culture; they are rooted in public policy. Children will know they are valuable — and valued — when they and their families are treated so.

If parents have no decent housing, job, or health care; if, in fact, their kids can make more money than they; if they must beg the government for every bit of help they receive; if parents are demeaned by our leaders and by the media; then their children will regard them in the same way. They can not reclaim parental authority without changes in public policy.

There must be a renewed, visible national commitment to end the racism and sexism that still dominate our public and private lives. Things may be better than they were 30

factories that served as a model for schools never tried anything as anonymous and mindless. Our kids are expected to spend their time going from one disconnected subject to another every 35 to 45 minutes. Math follows English, home economics follows literature — and then we wonder why young people fail to notice connections between subjects, forget one year what they learned the last, and rarely take any of it seriously.

For teachers, there is hardly any opportunity and certainly no incentive to compare notes with colleagues, linger with students at the end of classes, or even think about how they might change their presentation for the next class. There is no time to get to know the peculiarities of each student. With a daily teaching load of 150 students, a teacher dares not give homework that requires anything more than perfunctory marking or review.

Teachers work without the basic facilities that the poorest office provides: telephones, computers, copying machines, typewriters, support staff. They have no time or place for professional privacy, away from their students.

Our schools are like a badly organized conference that goes on and on for 185 days, with too many plenary sessions, few breaks, no time for talking with colleagues, poor food, and a few bad-tempered presenters who yell at the audience or belittle an attendee who falls asleep at the back of the room.

Nor do we treat parents in these schools much better. We do not require their employers to let them visit schools during school hours. We schedule appointments and visits at times that often require them to lose pay, and we get annoyed at them for making "excuses" for not coming.

And none of this is necessary. We could make schools smaller, so that teachers could get to know children, kids could know each other, and parents and teachers could interact naturally. Just because we build big buildings for them, schools needn't be organized under one banner or leader: these facilities can house many different enterprises.

And all parents could have the right to choose between accessible educational alternatives. They could have the assistance of professionals whose task it is to evaluate such options on their behalf.

And teachers could have the power to use their increased knowledge of each other, their students, and their students' families to make critical on-site decisions.

The Central Park East schools follow such a prescription. They are small; they are nurtured by a district committed to choice and staffed by adults who have extensive on-site power to make decisions.

We know we cannot prevent tragedy from striking or shield our students from the harsh world. But because we are small and because the adults in our schools are not powerless people, we can respond to our students in ways that tell them they and their ideas are valuable. That's how kids learn compassion.

In a single week, we have had to deal with the death of a beloved school secretary, the loss in a fire of members of one student's family, and the tragic events in Central Park. Only a week later, we had to address the sudden death of the first black chancellor of New York City's schools.

We have faced these tragedies seriously and deeply. That's one way we help young people learn that we love life, respect all people, and cherish each other.



years ago, but that does not mean much to my students. They are children now, and their pain is now.

We must spend money on children's needs apart from their schooling. Our school facilities should become places for year-round, weeklong supervised activities where children can build their minds and friendships — swimming pools, libraries, music classes, clubs of all sorts. We need to offer these kinds of options to youngsters. But school buildings currently sit empty while children spend hours in front of TV sets watching shows that feed their feelings of emptiness and powerlessness.

Schools are one critical place where society can intervene — but only one. To be effective, schools too must change. If we had invented schools purposely to increase the attractions of the streets, to promote peer isolation, to undermine adult authority, and to make kids sneer at "culture," they would look like America's junior and senior high schools today.

When such schools were first designed, few were expected to complete them. A small elite, hungry for learning or getting ahead, took honors classes, joined school organizations, served as leaders of their student governments. But most either dropped out, got pushed out, or attended classes with little show of interest. It was not until quite recently that all citizens were expected to meet high intellectual standards.

We created schools that treated — and still treat — children as a fungible mass. Even the mass-production

Deborah Meier is principal of Central Park East Secondary School and the Jackie Robinson school complex in New York City. This essay, reprinted with permission from the May 31, 1989 issue of *Education Week* and permission of Ms. Meier, is adapted from her testimony last May to the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families.