

Deborah Meier

## SCHOOL DAYS: A JOURNAL

Teaching, Thinking, Struggling, Coping

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*Deborah Meier is the director of the Central Park East Secondary school (CPESS), a public high school in New York City's East Harlem. The school starts in seventh grade and had its first graduating class in June 1991. CPESS serves a predominantly low-income African American and Latino population. What follows is a selection from a longer journal of life at CPESS. Changes in dates, names, and sequence of events have been made to maintain the privacy of students, their families, and the school's staff.—Eds.*

**September 14.** The children are especially studious the first week. It's even true of us teachers. We look more professional in September. We imagine every fall that this time we're going to get it right. We start off with fresh notebooks divided into well-organized sections. Of course, it's not a perfect beginning. We're starting with four fewer staff positions (out of thirty-five) because of budget cuts. Will it matter? We cut back on support staff, so we're bound to have gripes. But maybe it's like closets—the more you have the more you put into them. On the other hand, for the first time it's an experienced CPESS-style staff. Also, we calculated our cuts early, relied on attrition (and support from foundations), and didn't let anyone go, no matter how low their seniority. We gambled that given city-wide attrition there wouldn't be a massive bumping game. We were right. When budgets are set is often as critical as how much. (Within limits!)

In our sister elementary school there's a crisis a day. First music, then art is threatened. Finally the staff agreed to add three to four kids per class. It means twenty-eight vs. twenty-five in

kindergarten, thirty-three vs. twenty-nine in the upper grades. In a month they'll be feeling it.

**October 5.** Is it worth it? My co-director Paul and I sit from 8:05 to 8:40 A.M. scolding latecomers! We keep believing it's curable if we're tough enough! But it's hard to be tough if there's no "bottom line." I can't figure out a bottom line. We have the latecomers sign in; we send their advisers daily notes; we have detentions. Tardiness goes down for a time. Isn't this an odd way for me to spend my time? I suppose there are other useful side-effects to my being downstairs daily saying hello.

**October 10.** It's nice to see kids hanging out in classrooms—working on computers, writing papers, playing quiet games when classes aren't in session. But it's not legal. I look the other way. Then it gets out of hand and I lay down the law. That works for a while. Then . . . it's an endless cycle. Students ought to be able to hang out anywhere and not get herded into the gym, lunchroom, or even the library. But I worry about potential "incidents" and being asked "How come you. . . ." Oh, for a less litigious society! (Paul tells me our Saturday morning school really feels the best—serious, thoughtful, mildly playful, and completely voluntary.)

**October 26.** Lutsky, the school's "manager" of everything, found five vials of crack hidden beside the rear door exit of the school. The police were called. They believe this is a "stash," unrelated to our students. Naturally we can't be sure. The police say it's a handy place since the door is used only in fire drills. We so rarely suspect our students of being "involved" with drugs that I wonder if we're

naive. We have virtually no "drug prevention program"—but then that's a pedagogical decision. A good education and knowing each other well is what the kids need. As we talk I can see drug deals being made out of my office window.

**November 1, Friday, 6 P.M.**—in the country. I've been thinking about the argument we had at the staff humanities meeting. Madeline began by showing us a series of drafts of an essay that a student worked on with her. To what extent had the student made changes just to "please"? How could one tell if the student learned from it? How did she decide what to edit? Was the edited version always better? What standards was the student basing his judgments on? But . . . it shifted into a larger "ideological" debate about teaching and learning, what kids don't know how to do and—implicitly?—who's at fault. I didn't help matters. I got off into my distaste for the kinds of reports we encourage (or at least don't discourage), as though writing dull, pointless lists about a country, people, topic (generally plagiarized from encyclopedias) is a "developmental stage" in children's writing. It was easy to make the shift because we're more comfortable talking in generalities rather than engaging in close observation of one child's work. We get restless. By the end everybody felt more inadequate than when we started! Hardly a helpful session, although lots of important things got said.

**November 2, Saturday.** I'm staring at loads of Board of Ed memos and forms; why did I bother to argue with that amiable man at the Board of Ed when actually I know it doesn't matter how I fill them in—so long as he has numbers. All this compulsive collection of data—the more the better even if it's misleading and largely self-serving. Found a wonderful statement by some deep educational thinker in *Ed Week* responding to the criticism that all the international comparisons of student outcomes are deeply flawed: it went something like, "They may each be flawed, but taken together they add up."

Why did I imagine that the reform "movement" would take seriously the arduous task of school-by-school change that involves taking

practitioners seriously? Instead we still use a factory model. The latest official strategy is Bush's New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC). "Expert design teams" will create privately financed models, hand them over to practitioners to implement, and replicate, with centralized specs (national curriculum goals) and close monitoring (via exams) to keep the practitioners honest. In a period in which reform is fueled not by parents or teachers but by corporate and statehouse priorities, it's hard to imagine anything else.

The rhetoric of educational "crisis" has a dangerous side. It's built on a familiar but false story: that bad schools caused our economic woes, and good ones can cure them. Smart school people go along because they figure that it's a story that offers needed attention. But it can easily lead to rhetorical cures. Or worse. We're getting conned into some really radical changes we weren't expecting, for example, a combination of centrally driven testing and marketplace incentives (read "privatization"). The widespread perception that schools have failed to accomplish even the simplest tasks they once performed lends credence to the conclusion that once again public institutions have failed us. We're likely to abandon the dream of public education and local control in a panic (plus lethargy) based on phony data and bad analysis. The way we have allowed the story to be told has created a seemingly inevitable conclusion.

The real shortcomings have always been there. In booms and busts. What's new is that there no longer seems to be an assumption that we can afford to intervene with resources, or that there are real jobs out there for the real kids in our schools. They've been doomed. It's a fine idea to demand vastly improved educational standards, but what happens in the meantime?

The current crop of right-wing school reformers is reminiscent of some of the sixties New Left ones. Their critiques are alas more trenchant than their cures. They both want to leap over the present. The present generation be damned. They both have a vanguardist approach to change—the expert-driven revolution that's good for the ignorant masses (teachers, parents, kids). They're always in a

hurry-looking for shortcuts that avoid the ornery nature of us humans! They build their plans on the assumption that we can wipe out patterns of thought and habits of practice that are deeply imbedded.

The kind of reform we're after requires hopefulness, mutual respect, faith in democratic institutions, a certain tolerance for messiness, uncertainty—even ambiguity. Patience. Not patience because one is tolerant of injustice or ineptness—but patience because human beings don't change easily. And we pay a huge price when we forget that.

I silently scream every time I read about "international competition" as a reason to care about our children. As though our children only count if they help us beat somebody else's children—like the Japanese.

**November 13.** As I was leaving school this evening after family conferences I passed two parents in the stairwell. I said something pleasant; they barely answered. They were muttering; their son was walking apart. Uh-oh, I thought. Trouble. I found the adviser. Derek is new. Tenth grade. His parents are mad because his adviser—Howie—referred to Derek's bullying behavior but hadn't called them about it earlier. His father made clear he found both Derek and Howie at fault. (Howie thinks the father treated him as the more serious offender.) He left Howie with a demand for instant feedback on Derek's future behavior. (Derek was a silent observer.) Of course Howie is now even more reluctant to call the family if problems arise. It's a trap. But how to get out?

**November 15.** I visited George's math class all morning. Lydia, age thirteen, was dispiritedly trying to complete her assignment: map your "dream house" on a sheet of 8" x 11" graph paper. I asked her what her scale was. Each little square is one foot. (Does she know the difference between feet and square feet?) That meant her bedrooms were 5 x 7 feet. We found a room that size. A large closet. Despair. The dilemma: her dream was a house big enough for her parents, two brothers, sister, herself and all their families-to-be. But no one could exceed 2,000 square feet. It's not possible, she said. I presented George with the problem; he recommended downsizing her dream. But then

it's not my dream house, said Lydia. The constraints, George insisted, are important to get kids tackling the mathematical issues. He's right. Back to the drawing board. She showed me her first drawing, which was put together with four pieces of 8" x 11" graph pages. Her bedrooms were fine sizes. "But George said I had to put it all on one page," she lamented. Thus the cramped little rooms.

The project was all about scale, but alas, Lydia didn't get it. I showed her why the size of the paper didn't matter. Delight. The bedrooms instantly became 10' by 14'. To accommodate five families we decided on a dorm for all the children! However, I know by now that this breakthrough "aha" experience is only one more stage in a long journey before she "gets" the idea of scale. George was sure he had explained it. Wasn't she listening? I suspect he's a little annoyed at me for having caught one of his students in ignorance. He doesn't yet really accept that "telling" isn't teaching. Who does? We keep feeling sure that if we could but "tell it right." (The noble fantasy that fuels every curriculum reform.)

**November 18.** Last month we (the staff) wasted hours trying to decide on an approach to school life if the threatened custodial strike was called. This month we're trying to decide what to do if the Board wins its revenge on the UFT [United Federation of Teachers]. The Board's demand that teachers attend school for two extra days of "staff development" is now in arbitration. At stake: whether in a break with established practice teachers will be required to come to school the day after Thanksgiving and the first Monday of the Christmas holiday! As we await the arbitrator's decision, rumors fly: if teachers don't show up they'll be docked two days pay. Our issue: should we try to find a face-saving way to slip by this or make a point of refusing? Since the chancellor is not the bad guy in this story, why give him a hard time? Our high visibility (and extensive extra staff development) tempts us to take a visible stand. The degree of rage it raises in me is unreasonable. In a year in which the Board is unable to offer teachers anything (class sizes are larger, salaries frozen, and kids are coming to school more damaged than usual) our

"employers" have decided to pick a phony fight. God help us.

**November 25.** Rose, who works in the elementary school, says she saw Antonio buying or selling drugs last weekend. She isn't willing to be quoted on it. I understand although I suspect I could push her into it. Paul and I talk it over and decide to ask the adviser to call the family in. We'll tell them—with Antonio present—"We think it's true, but can't do anything about it whether it is or isn't so felt we just needed to pass the rumor on to you." They may get mad and defensive and accuse us (since the kid is sure to deny it). Or they could be grateful and acknowledge that they've been worrying. Or something in between.

**November 26.** We met with Antonio's family. He denied using or selling drugs, of course. But his mother trusted our story. These are the moments when the years of patient alliance between school and family pay off. We can help.

**November 27.** The arbitrator ruled 100 percent in the UFT's favor. No extra days. Sweet victory. But what a lot of wasted time.

**November 28.** The heat in the gym is still not working. Do we have to cancel gym classes? After school sports? It's a month since we reported it. The custodian is trying. But, no action. Do I try to use "influence"? If I fail? If we had to close the gym, it would be a disaster. Fortunately we've not yet had really cold weather. Half of the staff-development and teacher-planning time rests on the use of the gym! Not to mention early morning, lunch time, and after-school uses. What would we do for the rest of the lunch break??? I can't stand to think about it. I put it out of mind.

**December 3.** Came back from Carmela's funeral. The school's steady attention to Carmela and her family as she lay dying for nearly a year can't happen in a school five times our size. Yet death surrounds our kids. If death doesn't count, does life?

Friends in other schools claim they can see the despair; or is it the symptoms they see: violence, death, pregnancy, drugs. We see less of these—because we're smaller? more supportive?—and when we do, we think we can act, "do" something. Does that make our kids

seem more "normal"—joyous, giggly, flirtatious, friendly? Have we created enough of an internal culture to sustain hopefulness at least between nine and three? Is it mostly being small and intimate enough to pay attention? It's not that we've figured out how to make all our subjects interesting or relevant or our assessment authentic. Although we try. But the place itself is interesting and authentic. I used to say that I learned most of what I knew as a kid in the company of people who were talking "over my head." I think that's how human beings naturally learn. Maybe the kids learn more here accidentally than on purpose. There are so many conversations going on.

**December 12.** I shoo Felicida out of the bathroom where she and a friend are fixing their hair—five minutes after class has started. I next see her banging on a door that says PLEASE USE OTHER DOOR. THIS IS NOT AN ENTRANCE. I point to the sign and to the proper entrance. I next see her banging on *that* door. I go over and quietly open the door (it's not locked). She enters loudly. The teacher gives us an angry "Why are you interrupting this class?" look. I realize Felicida doesn't belong in this room but has come in to collect her coat and bookbag! I tell her in a whisper to come across to the office to talk with me. She gets nasty, belligerent, and tries out all her "attitudes" on me. Why doesn't she seem scared? I go from calm old lady to furious defied authority. I leave her to recapture my composure. I bring back all her records and we peruse them together. Her physical posture shifts. She allows a smile. She meets my eye. She accepts my role as giver of lessons. The chip on her shoulder shifts. It has taken more than an hour of my day. But we're both happy. I think it's a breakthrough. Still, we'll see.

**December 14.** I just read the kids' journals in my advisory. I asked them to write down our five "habits of mind"—which are listed on every classroom wall, discussed every week in our newsletter, used to organize curriculum, and are the basis for our "standards" for graduation. (How do you know what you know? What's your evidence? Are there alternative viewpoints? How and where does what you've learned "fit in"? Could things

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have been otherwise? Who cares, what difference does it make?) Only two kids out of ten remember any of them. I'm aghast. I start thinking we should have kids memorize them—although we ourselves never word them exactly the same way twice.

When we're trying to influence people's politics we recognize how difficult it is to dislodge a well-entrenched paradigm, a sustaining myth, an organizing principle. But when we "teach" we have to keep reminding ourselves that students are doing the same thing. They're screening out key points based on assumptions that we're not aware they hold; they're fitting new knowledge into old schema where it isn't appropriate. Researchers have demonstrated this over and over. But our paradigm of teaching and learning is so well lodged that we don't hear the evidence! "Teaching is telling, learning is remembering." If we could just say it better, the kids would finally "get it." We focus on telling, not on listening.

Of course, the more engaged they are, the less passive their relationship to schooling, the better our chances. The more they make us listen. It's not enough to "want to do well." There's got to be a willingness to take risks. How rare is it for a student to say thoughtfully, "I just don't get it." And persist. Most kids are not lazy or unmotivated. But they don't know how, for example, to put in ten hours of homework. Most of the kids do homework like I did piano practice. One eye on the clock practicing bad habits. Good "habits of mind" are not easy to catch on to.

**December 16.** One of the teachers showed me a letter from Cheneta, who graduated last year. She's now at Cornell. Says Cheneta, "Those five CPESS 'habits of mind' are proving very useful here." They "set us aside as special," said another student in a letter I got last week. People are "impressed," one kid quipped with a grin when he visited. (He's admitting he's bought in a little?)

Mike Rose, in *Lives on the Boundary*, walks the reader through his own initiation into the world of ideas. His apprenticeship. That's what a good school is: an apprenticeship into ideas. Learning to say, "I've got a theory!" Some-

how, somewhere young people need to join, if only part-time, the club we belong to. That's *more* critical than the particulars of what they learn. But most of the time they are resisting membership—either out of fear of rejection or because to join such a club means to reject their own community or peer clubs. Or because they just don't "get it" yet, or "who wants it!"

It goes against the grain to see this as our job. It's why we are so hypercritical. It's not what we're "spozed" to be doing. We feel we have to justify the time spent listening to and observing kids or engaging them in endless conversation or asking them to "write it again" and again. Shouldn't we be covering more! Won't they seem illiterate if we don't get to? Shouldn't we be pouring more in, instead of spending so much time stirring up what's already there! We drive each other mad spotting gaps—this kid doesn't use commas right, that one can't even remember the date of the Civil War! What kind of school are we?

**January 9.** Jose has, as usual, come to school hours late. I threaten. I call home. I remind him that it's our job to "teach" but his job (and his family's) to get to school. (Actually it's a poor way to pose it, since it sounds as though I mean that once he gets here we do all the work! Once again the language of schooling is based on a notion of teaching and learning that's all wrong!)

But he still comes in late. He's daring me to kick him out. What would be the point of it? Even if I could! (I can't.)

The "free schoolers" insist that as long as it's mandatory it won't work. There's a sense in which they're right. There's nothing unworkable or undemocratic about having mandated obligations to others. But if one doesn't "buy into them," they will not be done well.

So, Jose, his adviser and I agree on a new plan that includes new penalties. Will we be conscientious enough to follow through or will he wear us out? We need to attend to the other side too. Is his failure to engage related to not knowing *how* to succeed in our school or because he has other more critical priorities in his life? Is our involvement with his family a mistake? As long as he sees family and school as together, does this mean he can't use school

as an oasis from his family whom he is trying to distance himself from?

Tomorrow I meet with Yolanda about her pattern of lateness and absenteeism. In her case it's tied into her being a good daughter and sister. To her the school is a distraction from her central task: helping out those who love her and care for her. She smiles politely; there's steely disdain underneath it. At heart she's never with us. Doing well at school would require her to see us as allies. At present we seem at best a benign enemy (or nuisance), always telling her to make school her priority!

What differentiates these two from the ones who buy in fast?

**January 17.** It's the day before our Saturday retreat devoted to graduation standards. I'm nervously checking to be sure our external reviewers (college faculty, teachers from other high schools, and so on) have the material they need. Every student must complete the requirements of fourteen different "portfolio" areas: literature, history, ethics, science, math, media, and so on, and present seven of them to a Graduation Committee for questioning and defense. (The other seven are presented for a more cursory review.) The Graduation Committee has at least two assigned faculty, another adult of the student's choice, and a student. The whole thing is like a series of doctoral orals! It takes at least a year from the time the first set of work is presented until the last is approved. The kids take it very seriously. But ensuring that we have a set of shared and publicly defensible standards takes continual reexamination. We select a sample of items—including videos of Graduation Committee meetings—for staffwide review and then, ultimately, for external review. The "outsiders" review the material ahead of time. They start off by discussing their ratings and reasoning. The ratings are then compared with ours, and then we join together to argue over our rationales! It's a form of assessment that builds standards, examines teaching practice, and raises issues of curriculum—all at one and the same time.

The essence of our notion of standards is this publicness. It's like the old one-room school house evening performance, where kids got up

before the whole community and recited poems, were quizzed on history, and so on. It's like a well-done Bar Mitzvah. There's both showmanship and authenticity to it. It's why we're so hostile to the idea of imposed "standards" via tests. They wouldn't be so dangerous if they were low-stakes exams that were used mostly on a sampled basis or as a way to get a second opinion. But they're being proposed as high-stakes assessment intended to be used to make decisions simultaneously about grade placement, graduation, college placement, job entry, school accountability, and teacher pay. Snake oil.

And such testing leads to cheating—directly and indirectly. No testing system can ever entirely avoid it. People cheat on eye tests if they need to. I like ours for that reason. There are lots of different kinds. The conversation about the test is part of the test, we're always revising, and the stakes are never too high. They can always try again.

**January 24.** A jerry-built solution to our heating system in the gym will tide us over. It's cold, but bearable. The locker room is another matter. It's unusable.

**January 25, Saturday.** Our SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test] scores came in. Half above 790, half below. Once again they are largely a measure of the social class of our students. Plus race. Despite the coaching. Over 90 percent of this year's potential graduates took them. Is it fair to encourage them all to take these tests? I suppose it's a measure of their hopefulness (or naiveté) that they persist after low PSAT [Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test] scores. And we aren't good at discouraging kids. Last month the *New York Times* published ETS [Educational Testing Service] data showing how closely scores correlate with family income. Their graph grossly understates the case. The real social class disparities are much more devastating because so few students in the low-income categories take the test, and those who do are those rare high-achieving students who are considering expensive four-year colleges that care about SATs. Less than half of New York City's seniors take SATs, and only about half of the city's students ever reach their

senior year! So we're comparing all our students to the top 25 percent.

The SAT overwhelmingly measures class. But is this because of bad schools or bad testing? Is it part and parcel of the test design? Or because the impact of the school is always limited?

When it gets down to individuals, the mismatch between SAT scores and real intellectual competence is shockingly clear. Leona's 890 is such an inadequate statement of her exceptional intellectual ability. The wound to children's confidence and self-respect is enormous. If I could raise their scores in any way I knew how, I would, just to ease their pain. Attacking the testmakers doesn't relieve the burden of self-doubt.

**January 29.** Once again someone wants hard data on our success. As a purist about data I can't compress it into the needed two sentences. Compared to New York City data re attendance, graduation rates, test scores, college acceptances, it's so staggeringly high that I suppose precision isn't necessary!

Judy came in with her infant. She's one of four CPESSers who've had babies. How we agonize! We get anxious when the girls act so thrilled with a classmate's baby. On the other hand, motherhood is wonderful. If a youngster has chosen that route, however thoughtlessly, do we want to be her enemy? Is it contagious? Is that what I fear? So I hug her too. And feel joy.

**February 3.** Terrific staff meeting on racism. I started off irritated by the session's leader, who had us engage in a bunch of exercises I found silly and embarrassing. I put up with it in what I hope was good grace. Dom and Howie (both white) then role played a white parent luring a white teacher into a discussion about "those" kids in a clearly racist way. The tension among the white and black teachers was very sharp. Lois (white) felt sure it was a "straw man"; no white parent in our school would be so openly racist. I agreed. Dom said it had actually happened in just this way, and he had responded in just the way he play acted! I was aghast at both facts. It helped when someone "played" the white teacher and interrupted the attempted complicitous conversation by insist-

ing that "those" kids were "hers." There was an almost audible explosion of relief. We spent an hour or more trying it out other ways, while everyone commented and criticized different approaches. A lot of interesting issues surfaced. Would it be any more acceptable in our school if an African American or Latino teacher did the same thing with a fellow African American or Latino parent? I tried it out with Sandra (African American). I played the African American parent sharing "our" shared perception of whites in the school. I hammered it up but the African American teachers laughed in recognition. It looked less simple to me when reversed. But lots of staff had trouble with it both ways. I think everyone left feeling intrigued and pleased. I know Sandra gets mad at me for saying that these race/class/gender discussions only will work if they're "fun." All this talk about its being "painful" but necessary is a mistake, I argue. Granted, the African American staff feel the pain all the time, so why shouldn't we? But pain is not the best educator. Not for kids or adults. The kind of thing we learn best from pain is avoidance and bitterness. (A little "discomfort" is probably okay.) Maybe whites are morally bound to suffer the pain. But so what? Pain works when it's strictly voluntary—when you're in control of the level of pain! But staff meetings are something else.

I felt vindicated today. We've come a long way. It's getting easier to talk this way together. I came away feeling I'd caught on to something that had seemed elusive before. Is it translating into how we dare talk with kids? Because they desperately need opportunities to sort out racism—to deal with it in a "safe" way. They're as touchy as the staff. Self-doubt and a sense of hopelessness are things you can chip away at. But we're all naturally nervous about exposing ourselves to the underlying rage.

**February 7.** Remember Derek? I haven't given up. His father and I meet. He's proving to me that he's the boss. And I'm trying to suggest a way in which we can both be. Pretty soon we need to work Derek into this picture! It's partly an issue of race, partly gender. Partly this man's particular issue. Partly mine.

But it's also his way of caring for his son. Idea: place the requirement to keep in touch in his hands. (Why didn't we think of this before?)

**February 12.** Spent our advisory time organizing a cake sale for our spring trip. I hate cake sales. But I go along. We don't need to raise much money (or do much planning) because we're going to my place in Hillsdale, and the school pays for travel. The kids always give me a hard time about "Why can't we bring a Walkman?" or "You mean you don't even have a TV?" But they end up enjoying it. Above all they enjoy the sheer leisure and play. Running around the fields, dashing in and out, playing silly tag games, shopping, cooking, giggling before the fire, keeping me up very late at night, choosing a movie, bowling. Plus the required trip to a college campus. Visiting different college campuses each year has a cumulative impact. But it's the informal opportunity to be together in this unhurried and "alien" setting that I love most. They remind me of the weekends I spent in the country with my own children and their friends. Differences of class, gender, and race disappear for me in

this setting as they never entirely do in the midst of New York City and school.

No one wants to leave at the end of three days. For a moment we feel like family. Magical moment.

**February 13.** Scientists, bless them, have "discovered" (*New York Times*, December 24) that there's a quality called "hopefulness" that is a better predictor of success, even in college, than grade-point average, class rank or SAT score! Maybe it's "hopefulness" that we keep alive at CPE. Maybe our success is not related to our highly praised curriculum or pedagogy but to creating an intensely personal and stable place that's always there for kids. The kids complain at times that we give (other) kids too many chances. They complain about how the teachers are always getting "into our business." They tell visitors we're "like a family." At times I deny this—because we are after all here for a purpose. We're not endlessly bound to love and forgive. But on the other hand: maybe it's in that gray area between being a family and a school that we engender hopefulness.

We need this midwinter break. □