

# Supposing That . . .

BY DEBORAH MEIER

*Just suppose, Ms. Meier suggests, that the society celebrated what a good kindergarten seeks to accomplish and made that the criterion for all schooling — at any age, at any stage.*

**I**N TRYING to imagine what schools might be like if we weren't thinking about what colleges want, I went back to the beginning. For perhaps the only other time I was ever able to ask this question in a pure fashion was in the first years of my own teaching.

I was a kindergarten teacher. And the wonderful thing about being a kindergarten teacher — especially 30 years ago, before the children's garden turned into a first-grade readiness program — was that no one much cared what you did. That can be depressing, I know. But it can also be liberating. You can fill up your room with your heart's desire. And that's what I did. Of course, to do that successfully, it turned out that I needed to become a good ob-

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server of children's hearts' desires, as well as those of their families and of society. I also had either to know a lot about lots of things — because the curiosity of 5-year-olds ranges widely — or to enjoy learning things in the company of 5-year-olds. It turned out to be just the job for me.

A decade later, I had an opportunity to start a school, which we called Central Park East Elementary School. We decided to build it around the simple proposition that children between the ages of 5 and 12 could best be educated in a school that sought to prolong kindergarten for six more years. The research on what happened to that rather typical population of youngsters is pretty conclusive: from any angle one might want to pass judgment, it was a roaring success.

Of course, we had some relatively clear goals — some of them implicit and some explicit. However, in one form or another, they were the same ones that I had had as a kindergarten teacher. I wanted to prepare students to be comfortable in the "big conversations" that grown-ups engage in. I wanted them to feel confident that nothing, or very little anyway, was beyond their capacities. I wanted them to have a reasonable shot at being able to do anything that seemed important or worthwhile to them. That meant that they needed to be able to explore ideas freely and pursue them tenaciously without knowing ahead of time where everything might lead. Moreover, I wanted them to do so in a spirit of playful seriousness, with open minds. They needed to feel free to take intellectual and social risks — to ask silly and even outrageous questions, to make wild and improbable connections, to take on tasks that might require a long time to complete, and even to abandon some tasks in midstream.

When people tell me that skepticism is an advanced human trait that is best left to college students, I laugh. Teaching little children confirms the obvious: skepticism is the natural state of the human species, especially in childhood. Skepticism is "merely" the intellectually serious name we give to children's play. Little ones take few things for granted. They don't mind uncertainty, for they live with it all the time. If they're lucky, the only thing they take for granted is that their environment is organized so that they're usually pretty safe, so that someone is "looking out" for them while they explore the world.

Within the bounds of safety — rather

wide bounds, I would hope — young children can focus their attention on figuring out the world. They can turn everything inside out; they taste, touch, drop, and bang every object they can get their hands on — including people. They imagine being many different "others"; they think it reasonable to ask why, over and over again. Nothing is too outrageous to question — to the frequent embarrassment of adults. And the right information at the right time feeds their curiosity. They are collectors of the trivia that fits their current needs.

Small children are naturally unbored. And they are tenacious explorers. Little children have the most staggering attention spans, and it's sometimes very hard indeed to see the why and wherefore of what fascinates them. When first-grade teachers once complained to me about the immaturity of one of my former students and commented on his short attention span, I was amazed. "Damien?" I asked. The child I remembered was unwilling, nearly unable, to be dragged away from what he was involved in. Our attention spans, at least in school, seem to diminish as our age or "maturity" increases.

I consider *informed skepticism* — a willing suspension of prior belief — to be at the heart of a democratic education, a habit or disposition natural to young children and essential to an open society. For this reason, my experience working with little children was rather fortunate. It confirmed for me my belief in the potential of all our children and thus of all citizens. Unfortunately, in most human societies, this quality of mind rarely outlasts childhood, and it is certainly not the hallmark of most schooling.

Could things be otherwise? The history of progressive schools suggested that they could, and the history of the Central Park East schools and of others like them suggests that the answer is still yes — even for children deemed ordinary, at-risk, disadvantaged, and so on.

My experience in kindergarten also suggested that schooling could favorably affect the development of another disposition that is central to a democratic society: *informed empathy*. Democratic society depends on our openness to other ideas, our willingness to suspend belief long enough to entertain ideas contrary to our own, and the expectation that our ideas are forever "in progress," unfinished, and incomplete. But it also depends on our developing the

habit of stepping into the shoes of others — both intellectually and emotionally. We need literally to be able to experience, if even for a very short time, the ideas, feelings, pains, and mindsets of others, even when doing so creates some discomfort.

Such a disposition is increasingly critical to democracy, at least in part because our natural inclination to empathize seems not to extend very far. It stops long before we feel very much unease. We empathize best, of course, with those most like ourselves and for whom we have natural ties and shared self-interest. But in the modern world our long-range self-interest depends upon our going far beyond this, and to do so requires rigorous and continuous schooling directed toward precisely such an end. "Imagining" how the world might look from a different perspective requires information, training, and practice. It lies at the heart of great literature, mythology, history, art, and, yes, even science and math. Learning empathy is not a "soft" subject; it is the hardest one of all. It must marry imagination and scholarship.

My kindergarten classroom was again an interesting place to explore the ways in which we can encourage or discourage such empathy. The dramatic play of children is a way of widening their horizons. Imagining ourselves as other people and even other species is part of all good storytelling. The morning sharing circle is designed to let us hear and see one another in our diversity. But it is also a way in which we can respond to children's joys and hurts. When a child is injured, we can model empathy by our quick response to the wounded one, rather than by our immediate search to determine who is at fault. What we praise, what we attend to, and what we announce as valuable all help to predispose children in one way or another. If differences are seen as threatening, if kindness is seen as a scarce commodity to be hoarded, we have furthered one set of dispositions rather than another.

The moral code of kindergarten was not unimportant. Too often children assume that to be "good" in school has to do only with acts of compliance and that the adults in their world are more interested in whether they "make trouble" than in whether they display virtues of kindness, generosity, and sympathy. Being "bad" is too often merely synonymous with "causing trouble" for the teacher, not with causing harm to one's peers. In fact, the vari-

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ous cruel forms of inclusion and exclusion that even very young children practice are often ignored by adults in school; their consequences are thus unmediated by adult moral concerns.

Vivian Gussin Paley's astute stories in *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Harvard University Press, 1992) are a painful reminder of the moral lessons conveyed in the routine practices of schooling. In so many small and unintended ways we communicate that "fitting in" matters most. After all, school is an institution that depends on some fairly complex and unnatural forms of compliance. We tend to elevate in importance those behaviors that make such institutional arrangements run more smoothly. For little ones new to the demands necessary for the organization of very large groups, this makes for some difficult adjustments. We speak of these new necessities in tones normally reserved for very holy virtues. Raising one's hand, not fidgeting, and staying in line become not merely convenient habits but moral imperatives. We purposely ignore the intentions that lie behind children's noncompliance, but in doing so we miss a golden opportunity to teach higher-order moral thinking — as it is called in some of the latest cognitive moral theories!

**I**N IMAGINING HOW to organize schooling in a different way, we need to rethink the nature of the institutions we have created. The sheer size of our schools, for example, must be reconsidered. In creating huge bureaucratic institutions, in which teachers rarely get to know one another, their pupils, or their families in any depth and in which the spaces for children are too cramped and highly monitored for imaginative play, we limit the opportunities for open-ended and empathetic learnings.

The kindergarten comes closest to encouraging openness and empathy, but each year thereafter schools strip away, one by one, all the kindergarten-like features that help sustain such qualities. Each year the classrooms look barer than the year before. They are less connected to the interests and passions of children, less social and col-

laborative in nature, and less kind to individual differences. The adults in charge are less and less likely to know each child and his or her family well, and the presentation of material is less and less likely to require the active use of children's imagination. As children move up through the grades, they are more and more judged in competition with one another, and displays of generosity and affection are increasingly seen as divisive and inappropriate. Flights of fancy become improper, and those aspects of the arts that most speak to our capacity for empathy are more and more classified as frills. We increasingly glorify "objectivity" over subjectivity, the impersonal over the personal, external standardization over the development of internal standards, certainties over ambiguities, and the one right answer over possible alternative paths.

Our reasons for doing so are ideology and convenience, which mutually reinforce each other and make it doubly hard to escape their clutches.

*But suppose it were otherwise.* What if we could keep the kindergarten mentality going all the way through school? What if we took a step beyond the Central Park East elementary schools, where for years we felt constrained to prepare children — even if not immediately — for the harsher realities of junior and senior high?

That's why we created Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) — to allow us to hold on to our kindergarten philosophy for another six years. And we did. We continued to keep students in multi-age classrooms with the same teacher or teachers for at least two years. We continued to create schedules and curricula that had room for personal preferences, flexibility, overlapping disciplines, and sustained work individually or in collaboration with others. We found ways to organize space so that youngsters had room to build over a period of time, to have their work valued and analyzed by real audiences, and to make choices of when and how they would pursue a topic.

We even created a system of graduation that depended neither on accumulating credit hours in traditional disciplines

nor on passing standardized tests covering a prescribed curriculum. We instituted a series of intense committee meetings, much like the defense of doctoral dissertations, in which students presented their work for review by the faculty and their peers. Each student, with the assistance of his or her advisor, could design these graduation committee portfolio reviews in distinctive ways, although the general requirements had been set by the faculty. While all students had to present their work in ways that demonstrated competence both orally and in writing, some rested their case more on one form of presentation than another, and some even focused on such alternative modes as video, visual arts, music, and so on. Some built portfolios largely out of evidence accumulated through off-campus experiences, while others rested their portfolios almost entirely on fairly traditional academic coursework. Some relied more than others on the attestation of employers, co-workers, and others in the world outside the school.

But, for all that, we kept a careful eye on how our practices would look to colleges. Running through every discussion was the big question: Will this meet with the approval of teachers of college English, math, science, and history? We also kept in mind the impact of our practices on the College Board, the SAT, the entrance tests for the City University of New York, and the mindset of a typical college admissions office.

Is it fair, we continually asked ourselves, to send graduates out into the world in ways that will set them up for failure in the eyes of important others? No, we answered, of course not.

We hoped that the students' strengths would make up for any possible weaknesses. We hoped that we could justify our deviations from traditional practices on the ground that our approach was the only reason so many youngsters stuck it out at all, rather than dropping out as many of their peers had done in other, more traditional schools. Granted, our students might not be quite as well prepared for freshman math at the university. But if we had stayed with the traditional curriculum, many of them

would never have gotten a shot at being in a college math class at all; they would have dropped out along the way. As it was, our students needed to know how to get any extra help they might on occasion need. They needed more than the usual perseverance when things didn't make sense, and they needed a good deal of self-confidence in their basic capacities as learners. If we gave them these skills and attributes, maybe we could forgive ourselves for not having always prepared them directly for what the freshman math class sees as the essential bits and pieces of prior knowledge and skill.

But we have never been totally at ease with these answers. The compromises we have made mean that we lose students on both ends — those who cannot enter into even our academically focused, decontextualized frameworks and those who seek entry into the most rigid traditional schools. We look good statistically, but only we know the prices that have been paid.

If we had precious few huge lectures; if we had only an occasional multiple-choice test or short-answer quiz; if we offered students lots of opportunities to consult with others, to rewrite their papers, to get second, third, and fourth chances, would they know how to deal with settings that are different? The most sophisticated and well prepared of our graduates were, in fact, the ones most likely to get into small, elite private schools that more closely resemble CPESS in their structures — small seminars, intimate advisories, and so on. It was precisely those who had most needed the CPESS experience and who had benefited most from its unorthodox practices who found themselves in for the greatest shock when exposed to large, underfunded public urban and state colleges, whose structures most closely resembled the worst of America's high schools — large, impersonal, and mindless. Horace's compromise is but a pale description of the horrors of contemporary public two- and four-year colleges. How paradoxical. Worse — how tragic.

What should we have done? How rarely in those early days did we ask whether the kind of schooling they were getting in many colleges was good for them. Would it stand them in good stead after they got out of college? After they had received the many certificates of merit that stood between them and the larger world?

Oddly enough, we felt that our approach prepared young people better for the world

of hard knocks than for the insular world of academe. In fact, the intellectual habits and dispositions we tried to foster — focused as they were on the development of informed skepticism and empathy — would have their roughest and toughest survival test on the college campus, not in life itself.

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We at CPESS compromised right and left. We never challenged the categories of knowledge on the New York State Regents exams. We required students to demonstrate their habits of mind in 14 different fields, most of them precisely those designated by the Regents. And the traditional four major subject areas had to be included among the seven in which students would be expected to present and defend their work most intensively. We challenged the state's definition of "coverage" and opted instead for depth, for "habits of mind" rather than for retention of information. But we still insisted that our graduates had to display their intelligence in each and every field to a level of competence that not even all of us educators could master any longer.

Too often we were unable to spend the time and energy to promote young people's passions, time that had seemed so natural in elementary school. We put "first things first" — getting students into college. The arts suffered, although we regu-

larly decried that fact. Youngsters with odd-ball passions or with strong traditional vocational interests were largely left to feel a little inadequate, a little bit like failures.

Since we counted our success in terms of the number of graduates, the number who went on to postsecondary education, the number who got accepted to four-year colleges, and the number who survived college long enough to earn degrees, our more academic focus was natural enough. The students knew of our focus, and it set a value system for them. They didn't want to let us or the school down. But that focus had its price.

**B**UT SUPPOSE we hadn't been so focused on college admission as we have always known it. Just suppose that the society truly celebrated what a good kindergarten seeks to accomplish and made that the criterion for all schooling — at any age, at any stage.

Suppose we acknowledged that all life educates but that for a mere one-sixth of every child's life — ages 5 to 18 — we have publicly joined together to formally inculcate what we think is most important. First, we would come together around what we share: citizenship, our capacity to join in the civic life of our nation. Suppose our public schools were to be judged solely on this criterion, without regard to preparation for postgraduate vocational programs, of which college is merely one option. If we deemed all such postsecondary possibilities to be of equal merit, then we might think more about what dispositions, habits, skills, and knowledge would be valuable for all of them. We might ask what habits, dispositions, skills, and knowledge all students need in order to take on in a responsible way one enormous shared task: deciding the nation's collective future by voting for public officials.

Then we would look at the full range of roles that adults perform — friend, neighbor, family member, parent, citizen, and producer of goods and services. Who might be the "experts" to help in the design of schools that prepared youngsters for such roles? They'd be precisely these same people: neighbors, friends, family members, employers, and fellow citizens! We would need to develop some consensus on how public funds would be used to meet some commonly agreed-upon tasks, and we would need to decide on ways to allow accept-

able levels of disagreement on the same issues.

Some schools might then teach calculus in part because it is an example of a human invention of great beauty, wonder, and utility. They might also teach calculus in part because it serves a particularly important role in a variety of the most critical of our modern sciences. But other schools might not place calculus among the staples of major course offerings and might question its status as part of the background of a well-educated person. Instead, these schools might place music, visual arts, and so on in such a privileged position: they might teach courses on the sonata form or Impressionism or cathedral architecture for much the same reasons that calculus now holds such undue status.

What would *not* predispose schools or students to choose one or the other of these courses — or even something entirely different — would be the requirements for a high school diploma, which today are based on the requirements of college admissions offices, which are in their turn based on the latest traditions designed by the academ-

ic communities of American universities. Each existing academic discipline (and subdiscipline) struggles to see that the particulars that distinguish it at its highest and most elevated levels are represented in appropriate forms in the “tracks” leading up to these peaks.

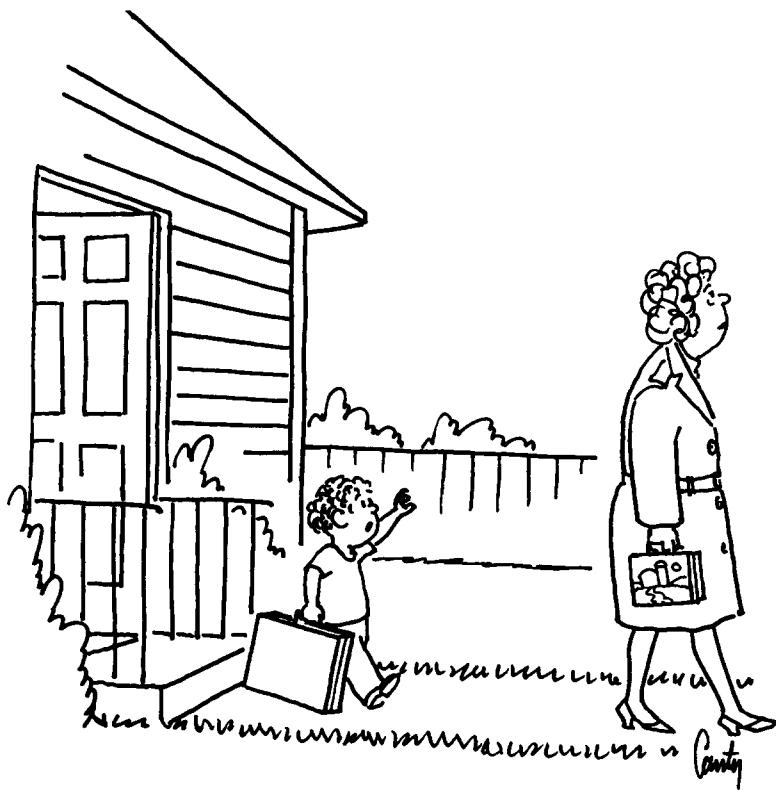
Thus, if one does not want to cut off at the pass a student who might one day seek to be an esteemed academic historian, literary critic, scientist, or pure mathematician, one must get over the hurdles such disciplines erect along the way. For it is the requirement that such hurdles be passed that helps produce the largest possible pool of talent from which to select the choicest few neophytes to be inducted into the ranks. As Mark Kishlansky notes in an essay in the January/February 1996 issue of the *Harvard Alumni Magazine*, in which he describes his passion for teaching history, of a thousand students who begin graduate study in history, only about 60 will do productive work in the field. He designs his work with them in mind. It's for those 60 students that Kishlansky mightily strives, paying little heed to his impact

on the habits of mind of all those who pass through Harvard University. Is Kishlansky so different from the best and brightest of our high school history teachers?

Instead, we at CPSS proposed that the justification that a particular subject, discipline, or competency be *required* for high school graduation must rest on its equal importance to all vocations and all occupations, with particular importance assigned to those vocations that are shared by all — our tasks as citizens. The training of specialists would not be the responsibility of our public high schools.

It would thus be left to postsecondary education — be it education sponsored by the public or private institutions of learning or by private industries — to train people in the disciplines necessary for the conduct of their chosen specialties. If we believe that citizens need more than these required 13 years of public schooling to conduct society's business, then the *publicly required* period of education should be extended for everyone at public expense. If this seems futile, as it does to me, perhaps it would be more sensible to provide a “voucher” — modeled on the GI Bill — that would allow all citizens at any period in their lives to pursue a common liberal education, in the tradition of the Norwegian folk schools. Eighteen seems a good time to get down to the serious business of preparation for specific roles in life — even if only for the *next* role. Where there are specific “trades” of public importance that the market is unprepared to fund — as may be the case with varied scholarly pursuits — public subsidies should encourage students who are disposed to these areas to pursue them. Indeed, they should even be highly rewarded for doing so when a shortage might impede socially desired ends.

But the primary public debate should focus on what it is that's so important to know that we must require every single American to spend 13 years at the task. The argument put forth on behalf of the “kindergarten tradition” of skepticism and empathy would thus be placed before the public as one possible organizing principle. But it is not the only one, and quite likely it would not be the most popular — at least under present circumstances. And whether we can organize the debate so as to permit different answers, even allowing for some shared common core, must itself be part of the debate.



“Mom!”

**O**NLY WHEN we change the terms of the debate can the debate be an authentic one. Since the number of Harvard freshmen will not change appreciably no matter how we resolve our debate, Harvard's admission policy should not set the ground rules for what constitutes the "educated person," as it has since the late 19th century. For reformers, the problem is to maximize the benefit for all our children. That requires changing the way the score is kept.

We are seeking a definition of being well educated that allows us to judge our students on a basis that can be universally achieved. Rather than see our education system as a sorting machine for earning places on higher rungs of the ladder, a new definition of educational success would describe traits that could be universally held by all citizens and that could underlie their successful participation in a whole range of occupations that society requires of them. Thus the cosmologist and the cosmetician would both need a first-class basic education. As citizens, their tasks are identical; as working members of society, their tasks clearly differ, and only at that point should their future goals be critical to the nature of the expectations we hold for them. Both need to know how to think about complex matters, both need to care about others, and both need to know how to learn new things to keep up vocationally.

What might such a redefinition of the requirements of schooling do to postsecondary education? It might make the current system completely unnecessary. A wide range of different kinds of new institutions might also arise, including schools organized by particular trades and industries to fill specific needs. Such institutions would probably be tuition-free or might even pay stipends to students, who would have apprenticeship-like status. Other institutions might be organized for those students directly interested in specific academic disciplines as preparation for vocations that require high-level disciplinary specialization. Some of these institutions would require heavy public subsidies, and some would function more like vocational schools — preparing students for accountancy, law, medicine, or teaching.

Still other institutions would develop as halfway houses for young people interested in exploring future options in a general education setting, with the aim of leading them into one of the other paths

or directly into fields that do not require a great deal of specialization. Some of these choices would offer appropriate parent-like supervision and opportunities for students to test out their life skills in new campus-like settings. Some would combine important public service work with various forms of general education and some specific field-oriented education: forestry, child care, recreation, and so on.

The range of possibilities is enormous. But no one would be taking a course in mathematics or Western civilization just because the credits are required to get "the damn certificate." We would reduce the hordes of talented young people sitting through expensive college classes without any interest in the subjects. Most of these new schools would be open and accessible to people of all ages, as part of a general national effort to upgrade the skills and mental habits of all citizens throughout their lives.

Side by side with this effort to upgrade skills, there might be a thriving industry of general education programs and courses offered to Americans of all ages and inclinations — both basic and advanced — so that our general curiosity and our search for knowledge and truth would remain a subsidized human activity. These would be the most prestigious of schools, filled with eager and enthusiastic citizens, driven by their own curiosity and ambition. As mentioned earlier, upon successful completion of what we now call high school, each graduate might receive a certain number of lifetime vouchers to enroll in an assortment of free or reduced-price courses and programs. We could even stack the deck in favor of *not* using the vouchers until one is older and wiser.

Wouldn't it be fun to approach the question of educating the young from a more commonsensical perspective, one not imposed on us by centuries and decades of academic and vocational rituals? There's not a country in the world where the members of the college faculty think the students arrive on campus "properly" prepared. Prepared for what? For them. Employers always complain, too, although, when one gets right down to it, they're mostly upset not about new employees' lack of academic expertise but about their unwillingness or inability to pick up new skills and new aptitudes — plus their bad "attitude" and poor work habits. But we feel obliged to pretend otherwise.

The word *academic* has become a code word, signifying many different things to many different people. The word can be either an insult or the highest praise; it can mean "pointless" or "important." But usually it means "dry" and not inherently interesting. Lately the back-to-basics crowd has used "academic" simply to mean teaching the ABC's and rote arithmetic. It's time we talked in ordinary language so that "academic" can revert to its honored meaning and not function as a stand-in for everything we happen to be in favor of.

When children are between the ages of 5 and 18, we're primarily in the business of rearing them, and schools play a part in that. It makes good sense to rear our children to conduct themselves in ways that are compatible with democratic life — and that includes a describable set of habits of heart, mind, and work. And it makes good sense to rear our children in ways that keep them safe from harm to themselves and others. After that, grown-ups have many different tasks and responsibilities, and we should not have pre-sorted the young by trying to predict who might best fit which task. Instead, we should create the widest possible range of options from which the young can freely choose at the age when they are fit to do so, according to their merits and inclinations or according to their willingness to work hard at something for which they lack natural talent!

In a way, what I'm proposing might get back to what it meant to rear children prior to the invention of modern schooling — only with a far more complex and ambitious agenda, given the far more complex roles citizens of a modern democratic society must all be prepared to play.

A horse and buggy is not at fault for not being able to go 60 miles an hour. Exhorting driver and horse to go faster or blaming them for having insufficiently high expectations is a futile exercise. What is needed is to invent the car. As a society we decided that everyone deserved the best but forgot to define "best." But once we wanted everyone to have the "best," we had in effect told the horse and buggy to do the impossible. Rather than chug along as though we hope no one will notice the sleight of hand, it is time to ask, What's it all about? Or, in the words of the fifth habit of mind we seek to instill at CPSS, So what? Who cares? 