

Common Sense

by Deborah Meier



Essay

14

The depressing thing about arithmetic badly taught is that it destroys a child's intellect and, to some extent, his integrity. Before they are taught arithmetic, children will not give their assent to utter nonsense; afterwards they will." – W.W. Sawyer, *Mathematician's Delight*

It's been nearly forty years since I first stepped into an urban public school in the role of parent, and, soon after, as a substitute teacher. This initial introduction was one of the most enlightening experiences of my life, and helped me understand why the struggle to sustain democracy was so hard and so often frustrating. Never before had I been in a setting that was so deeply in conflict with the essential state of mind on which democracy depends: respect for ordinary people and ordinary "common sense" and for their need to exercise their own judgment about what does and doesn't "make sense." No one else can do it for us.

Spending five or six years in such institutions, as most adults once did, probably had a relatively inconsequential effect on how they saw themselves or the world. Most of what they learned was from the company of the adults in their community. But by the time I entered schools in my parent/teacher role, most youngsters were required to spend twelve or more years there – and today even that barely suffices. The "certification" role – the degree to which schooling now stands as an obstacle to almost any self-respecting work – has altered formal education's meaning and impact. It is no longer a frill.

It still is true that only something like one-fifth or one-sixth of our waking hours are actually devoted to schooling itself. But modern schools are society's defining identifiers of value,

talent, usefulness, and meaning. They establish our pecking order. It is for four- and five-year olds the place where judgments are first made by people who see you as one among many, waiting to be compared and molded into something better. And as they get older, instead of keeping company with adults, students are enclosed in a world of peers, captives of a world designed by another group of adults for the purpose of making money off the appetites of the young. This phenomenon, destructive and depressing, is the apex of "utter nonsense" itself.

But we have the means to resist and to invent ways of raising our kids so that "making sense" is at the heart of learning. Perspectives very different than our own are part of the setting for making sense. And on the way to making sense there is much ambiguity and uncertainty. Learning to celebrate these qualities of mind is what schools can contribute, even though, in fact, they tend to do the opposite.

The ten Common Principles of the Coalition are merely an effort to describe the conditions that increase the odds for getting the balance right: the ratio of teachers to kids, the size of the school itself, the power of those who work directly with students to have a strong say in decision-making, a respectful attention to our many heritages and cultures, as well as individual differences – these are what hold us together. But carrying them out can often divide us as we make different compromises, get tired at different times, and serve different families and different masters.

Teaching children the "algorithm," whether in math or history or science, is hard to resist, and at times it may even provide

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the relief a child needs before going deeper. Making such judgments is what parents and teachers do every minute they are in the presence even of a single child, much less thirty. But they can be "trusted" to do so only if, as the Common Principle number four declares, they are in a position to exercise judgment on matters of importance. They too can say, "This makes NO sense." A scripted teacher is more dangerous than an often unwise teacher. You cannot teach the young about the exercise of judgment in its absence.

Schools like Mission Hill – schools that have so much going for them in creating such norms, schools that were created precisely for that purpose – do not find any of this easy. Finding that right balance is time-consuming. And time – leisure – is not a part of very many school schedules, not to mention our life schedules. We are always balancing bottom-line musts against each other and feeling vulnerable as a result. Family versus work, the children at schools versus one's children at home, seeing a movie versus reading a book, doing either versus preparing lessons, calling a family member versus calling an old friend. It seems utterly impossible to imagine being an active citizen on top of it all, a citizen of one's school or one's society!

The Greeks had a solution: only people of sufficient means not to have to work were full citizens. Citizenship was an occupation. The obvious inequity of their solution is one that in reality has beleaguered us ever since – only those who have the leisure or can pay others to act on their behalf have full citizenship even in our far more equitable democracy. If democracy and equity are truly to go together, we must tackle both the issue of education, and of leisure. So too was this the conundrum for John Dewey, upon whose work so much of Coalition practice rests. He saw schools in a democracy above all as a place for the preparation for the vocation of citizen, and as an ally to the struggle to alter other social conditions that impeded its full practice.

It's well-nigh impossible to get this thing right, even were the setting is ideal, and it's that much less possible in settings – where many of us live and work – that were designed to treat kids and adults as interchangeable, scriptable parts of a larger machine. The more we resist allowing nonsense to prevail in school, or in any other place we find ourselves, the better. When it's tempting to utter nonsense, try the real stuff: Edward Lear or *Alice in Wonderland*. Good nonsense provokes laughter and thought and joy. But "utter nonsense" paralyzes

and leaves real power to those who are less dependent on the public system of schooling to develop the habits of mind (and have already the power of status and money) to use democracy effectively – on behalf of our own interests, the interests of those we love, not to mention our nation and even planet we live on itself.

Children have more need of models than of critics. –Joseph Joubert

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