How Much Is Learned When We're Not Looking: The Promise of CES Elementary Schools

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In the mid-1980s, I discovered the soon-to-be-Coalition of Essential Schools as I was contemplating starting a secondary school in East Harlem, a follow-up to our successful little network of progressive-minded elementary schools: Central Park East, Central Park East II, and River East.

Through a series of lucky connections, we got Ted Sizer interested in our new venture, and thus was founded Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) in the fall of 1985. Thus was also founded the (alas, now defunct) Center for Collaborative Education in New York City, a network of like-minded schools. At our height, we had about 50 small elementary and secondary school members, and we were the CES NYC affiliate center. With support from the alternative high school department and grants from a number of local foundations, we experienced a kind of spontaneous combustion; we were, we thought, a genie that could never be put back into the bottle. We were both right and wrong. Today, 20 years later, our slogans have been co-opted by the big guys – Michael Bloomberg, Joel Klein, the Gates Foundation, and so on – but our own stories and lessons too often have been forgotten. The slogans persist, in greater numbers than before we began our work, but even at their best, they too are stunted by the new paradigm, in which children are tools for beating the foreign competition.

One of the lessons of our Coalition-style elementary school work was the power of the connection between five year olds and 18 year olds, and the thread that runs through those years to produce a truly powerful educational experience. Today, in contrast, the worst aspects of the so-called "standards movement" have made almost unrecognizable what we meant in 1985 by the word standards. Alongside the dumbed-down notion of standards has come a distorted notion of intellectual rigor. Together, they threaten what America truly needs and undermine the best of what we once were. A new K-12 drive to turn schooling into a business – with the bottom line being test scores, test scores, test scores – isn't even good for business. The new leadership of school reform, personified in NYC by Klein and Bloomberg, is driving schools to pay for results, offering financial rewards to children, teachers, and principals who improve scores (by any means necessary). Win or lose, we will pay a price.

It's not all new, of course. In the 1980s, I was attracted to the Coalition and to Ted Sizer's Horace's Compromise by the opportunity to use its good reputation to combat precisely such features of the old traditional system. Pay by results is a late 18th century idea that crops up again and again. It was back in style in the 1970s when we got our start. The wave of reform that the Coalition was part of in the 1980s was, we thought, an antidote to this. Little did I suspect that the New Wave of Reform would soon transmorph into an intensification of all that was wrong with the old ways of educating. Our little network of elementary schools in East Harlem's District 4 had managed to operate with a degree of freedom to try new things otherwise unknown in NYC. Thanks to an unusual superintendent and a distant central bureaucracy, we created three small PreK-6 schools that reinvented progressive education for public school children. Long a staple of NYC's finest and most expensive elite private schools, we offered progressive education (against everyone's advice) to the poorest of Latino and African American children. And it was so popular that between 1974 and 1985, the schools and the network grew, finally producing the natural idea of expanding into a secondary school.

The spirit of progressivism represented by Ted Sizer in his works on secondary education fit almost like a glove to our K-6 work. Of course, as the ideas appeared in the form of the Common Principles, we considered his 80:1 ratio between kids and teachers to be ludicrously too large, and the absence of much talk about the connection between family and home a missing link. We'd have paid a bit more attention to

the importance of the arts and imagination in defining what it meant to use one's mind well, not to mention the role of play, hands-and-minds, and self-initiated adventures. And we'd have added a codicil about the impact of class and race on education aimed at building and nourishing a democracy. But the heart and soul behind his then-nine Common Principles fit our work and the soon-to-be-added tenth common principle dealt with the latter.

But we missed one thing, maybe an eleventh principle. Intellectual life doesn't begin at 12 or 14, but at birth. Infants' exploration of the world is essentially that of philosopher and scientist, making larger sense of the details of their lives – the touch, smell, and feel of everything. Children are continuously reorganizing their conceptual maps of the world and trying them out over and over and over again, to our adult delight or irritation. Little ones have an extraordinary span of attention; their engagement is hard to interrupt and they take the world into their own hands, never waiting for someone else's agenda. They are, in short, indefatigable intellectuals-in-training. What's missing for many a 14 year old is not just good "reading skills" or basic arithmetic knowledge. What is worse by far, and harder to make up for, is the disengagement such youngsters have for discovering the world – not just written text, but the text of life. If that hasn't been disconnected, the make-up "remedial" tasks are hard but not insuperable; but if it has, then it is easy to see such kids as fodder for the job marketplace, trained to undertake tasks that range from routine so-called low-skill to low-judgment high-skill work (see Mike Rose's Minds at Work for more on these ideas). The latter sort of work, toward which teaching increasingly is being pushed, refers to work that has been pre-scripted so that skilled people can do it without exercising professional forms of judgment.

But if what we want is a nation of citizens prepared to be members of the ruling elite, "deciders" of matters of importance in their local as well as international communities, than a different kind of elementary and pre-elementary education is a must. The kind of thematic curriculum, the exploration of complex ideas, the sorting out of conflicting evidence that lies at the heart of Coalition secondary schooling starts long before and is harder and harder to "make up" for. Not impossible, and CPESS' intensity and single-mindedness had an impact on many of its students who had not attended Central Park East-style elementary school. But the ratio of adults to youngsters, and the intensity of those relationships required many sacrifices, and some were and are hard to justify. Similarly, the hours which both students and staff put into the "school" per se were greater and, over time, bound to be more expensive than anticipated. (Perhaps these contributed to the fact that CPESS is no longer a CES school.) Still I do not regret trying it, and discovering it was not a foolish dream.

I went from CPESS to Mission Hill, a K-8 school, because I remain convinced that we have regressed in our thinking about the pre-14 crowd at a great cost to what can happen after 14. And when we think about younger children we mostly think about stuffing them with "knowledge" and "standards" earlier and earlier. Like teachers of every age we tend to think the teacher before them "should have taught them x or y" so we don't have to do it. It starts early with complaints about what kids didn't learn at home to what their fourth grade teacher forgot to teach them (when Columbus landed in America, their multiplication tables, long division or fractions).

The Coalition needs to rethink deeply the implications of its views about secondary education as they apply to younger children. We all need to be asking deeper questions about the links that are missing rather than blame them on others. We need to take seriously how much is learned when we're not looking, how much sheer delight motivates us to undertake the most frustrating and complicated learning tasks. We need to remind ourselves how crucial it is to be surrounded by those who already practice what we merely aspire to, and thus how useful it is to have eight year olds near 16 year olds, for adults to argue and discuss in the presence of the young, not to mention actually practicing their craft in all its particularities. We need to relink the world of adults to the world of childhood, in all its facets. Not just the world of adult leisure, but the world of adult craftsmanship.

The best kindergarten, I used to say, is what we want for learners of every age. To maintain the spirit of play requires a grounding in play, as well as the carrying over of its insights into the work to be done. Alas, we have increasingly taken the worst high schoolclassroom – in all its sterility – as the model for the modern kindergarten, and indeed as the model of good parenting, which is a chilling prospect. In Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed, James C. Scott describes the dangers of a way of observing and acting on the world that encroaches into more and more spheres of human activity, with imperialistic pretensions to be able to replace our direct "seeing" with so-called

"academic" rigor. Not only is this in keeping with learning "the basic skills," but it is precisely the driving force behind such skill building.

When a five year old child questions conventional wisdom, and questions why we call a rock "nonliving," or insists that a light object would fall more slowly than a heavy one, and on and on, we have a choice: to patiently celebrate and explore – over years – her approximations of knowledge or to undermine her intelligence. When we dismiss such theories it as "cute" or "wrong," we do just that. But in our drive to get higher test scores, we often feel powerless to do otherwise for fear that our own respect for the child's observations may interfere with getting the "right" answer.

The Coalition, from the start of kindergarten through the end of high school, must be a force to change this mindset and to set forth, as Sizer reminded us decades ago, genuine standards of real-life quality work that can inspire all our citizens to as yet unachieved heights. And it must start with the very young so that we don't spend the second half of schooling having to undo the first half!

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