

## THE KINDERGARTEN TRADITION IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

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Returning to Chicago is always a voyage of nostalgia. This is where the best things in my life—the things I hold most dear—got started. All three of my children were born in this city, and that alone gives one a special feeling for a place. In addition, this is where my teaching career began. And while at first this hardly seemed a blessing, teaching has turned out to be a labor of love.

In the mid-1950s, I graduated from the University of Chicago with a Master's degree, dead set against teaching. I had resisted taking courses in education, despite strong encouragement, precisely because this was the kind of thing women were urged to do just "in case," or for pin money, or while their children were young. I was not going to fall into that trap. But a few years later I did just that, and for just those reasons. It was to be a temporary measure until my kids were older.

I had been the product of an independent private school, and attended Antioch and then the University of Chicago. I'd had, in short, a sheltered idea of what school life was like. My entry into Chicago's public schools was, therefore, a stunning shock to be repeated again and again as I moved first to Philadelphia and then New York. The first and most striking reaction I had to Chicago's public schools was that they were, and still are (although I'm somewhat more numb to it now), the most disrespectful environments—even for adults—that I had ever experienced. I had no prior experience of being treated with such little respect or common courtesy, even as a child. Since my children started in the Chicago public schools at the same time that I began to teach in them, I got a double dose of disrespect.

I recently came upon a letter I wrote during my first year as a substitute in Chicago's South Side schools. I had two stories to tell. The first was about my feeling of personal humiliation at the way I was treated and my difficulty in knowing how to respond to it. I wanted to walk out indignantly, making clear that I refused to be associated with an institution that could treat anyone so

badly. But I simultaneously felt feisty: "They're not going to get rid of me so easily." The second story was about my shock at a simple truth that I had never before faced so squarely: some of us grew up in schools like those I had experienced as a child and others experienced schools like those I was subbing in daily—and we were all citizens of the same country. Recently, this indignation was reignited as I shared my own two children's experiences as elementary school teachers: one working in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and the other in Oakland, California. Could it be that both school systems they described were intended to produce citizens of the same country?

I entered teaching accidentally, and became a kindergarten teacher for the same reason: it was the only teaching job available part time. I didn't want to teach, but above all I didn't have much respect for teaching little children. And there I was doing both and finding myself plain wrong on all counts. This fortuitous opportunity to work with young children developed in me a particular viewpoint and perspective that has, as much as anything else, shaped all of my subsequent efforts. I have carried a kindergarten teacher's perspective with me, first into elementary school as a whole and now into high school.

When I went to get my high school principal's license, three high school principals sat in the audience to rate me. As the final exercise in a long examination procedure, I was supposed to explain what in my background fitted me for such a license. Since my resume indicated that I had never worked in a high school, and had, in fact, only taught three to six-year-olds, I suspected my audience thought I had a lot of nerve applying for a high school principalship. I told them, in some detail, why I believed the kindergarten tradition was the most appropriate basis for all schooling.

Kindergarten was the one place—maybe the last place—where you were expected to know children well, even if they didn't hand in their homework, finish their Friday tests, or pay attention. Kindergarten teachers know that learning must be personalized, just because kids are idiosyncratic. (I speak here of the old-fashioned kindergarten which did not yet look like a first grade.) Kindergarten teachers know that helping children learn to become more self-reliant is part of their task—starting with tying shoes and going to the bathroom. Catering to children's growing independence is a natural part of a kindergarten child's classroom life. It is, alas, the last time children are given independence, encouraged to make choices, and allowed to move about on their own steam. The older they get the less we take into account the importance of their own interests. In kindergarten we design our rooms for real work—not just passive listening. We put things in the room that will appeal to children, grab their interests, and engage their minds and hearts. Teachers in kindergarten are editors, critics, cheerleaders, and caretakers, not just lecturers or deliverers of instruction. The value of what Ted Sizer (1984) calls "coaching" (p. 3) is second nature in the kindergarten classroom.

In between kindergarten and postgraduate school something else happens. People who work with doctoral candidates rediscover that they can't handle more than five or six students at a time, because they have to get to know their students and their student's work well. But in between, there is a vastly different mind-set about teaching and learning. The more difficulties students have in learning, the vaster that difference becomes. Teachers who work in community colleges teach five courses for every one or two expected of a professor at the University of Chicago. For most teachers, school is a sorting and screening out institution, where everything we know about teaching and learning tends to go out the window. Layers upon layers of time-honored institutional malpractice, and ingrained modes of thought and language make it hard to think about schooling any other way.

The jargon of our profession is hard to escape. Grade levels, norms, and even the "developmentalist" clichés of early childhood educators can be both misleading and dangerous. Are five, 15, and 50-year-olds really that different? In stressing the differences we often forget our common humanity. Amazingly, what is true about how five-year-olds learn is equally true of how I still learn. And not, I think, because I'm such a peculiar adult. Few things annoy me about 15-year-olds that don't apply also to the adults at school. It's hard at staff meetings for us to listen to each other. We interrupt, get up and walk around, read a book, pass notes, or even fall asleep when the agenda gets boring. It's not a wonder that my favorite Piagetian, Eleanor Duckworth, seems almost entirely uninterested in Piagetian stages, and treats adults as though they were still concrete thinkers. I'm not suggesting that there are no differences between me and a five-year-old, but if we reflected on ourselves as learners we would design schools more learner-friendly for kids. We don't have to design them differently *just* because they are five years old. Schools need to be restructured because we're human learners. Period.

What we did at Central Park East, and what we did in District #4, was build a network of elementary schools based on good nursery school and kindergarten practice. Ten years later, after celebrating a decade of growth, Ted Sizer came to visit and said: "Why don't you just keep this going through twelfth grade?" What he recognized was the similarity between good high school practice and good nursery school practice. Dare we? Could we take on teenagers? Isn't that an impossible age? I had spent a lot of time avoiding adolescents in groups of more than two. If I was going to start a secondary school, I'd certainly need to think in terms of at least three.

We read Sizer's book (1984), *Horace's Compromise*. We examined the high schools our own elementary school graduates had attended. Most of our kids, after all, had survived and even graduated from high school. As we looked over the data, the miracle was that virtually no children had dropped out. We didn't think it was due to the strength of their academic preparation, although it wasn't bad. But we thought our kids started high school with an extraordi-

nary head start: they felt comfortable in a world that included adults, they found the people who could help them get through the system, and their families also knew how to negotiate on their behalf. They knew how to cope.

As we listened to their individual stories (as well as the stories of the children in our own families), we realized that the high schools they attended were peculiar institutions designed as though intended to drive kids to the edge of their sanity, into numbness and mindlessness. The schools removed the very adult role models they most needed; all the interesting and strong adult/student interactions used by young people to test their ideas and their new strengths were absent from high school. Gone were powerful adults of any sort. We placed them, instead, in a most vulnerable relationship to hordes of peers, without guidance or nurture to handle peer pressures. Then we said: "Look how weak and bad they are." We removed all healthy risk-taking, all serious and sustained opportunities for thought, and then complained about their short attention span and unhealthy risk-taking. We gave them seven, eight, even nine different periods a day in randomly ordered short snippets—English, Home Economics, Math, Social Studies, Gym, Science.

Imagine an endless conference with many plenary sessions, long speeches, short (if any) question periods, no chance to talk to colleagues, no breaks: that's school. Unlike a conference, you can't sneak out in the middle of a session to go to the bathroom or light a cigarette or whatever else we all do to break the tedium and tension. Imagine if any conference you've attended had lasted for 185 days. When we go to conferences we look forward to seeing old friends, or finding a job. That's why kids keep coming back to school, too—to see their friends, to make connections. It's in the bathrooms, the halls, the corridors, and the playing field where the real life of school is taking place—just as it does at professional conferences. We teachers frown on it; we're even infuriated by it. "Why aren't they interested in the really important stuff?" We blame it on their impoverished backgrounds or hormones or parental disinterest. If we went into high school education, we knew we would have to change all of this.

Kids need to be immersed in a world where powerful adults are at work—and at work collegially. They need to experience—see and hear—adults thinking aloud, making decisions, utilizing judgment, organizing to resolve differences, and expressing their care about ideas as well as each other. We tell them they should take ideas seriously. Then we rush them through a curriculum in which serious ideas never appear. I am familiar with many teachers who care about history, politics, and literature, but there's no way their students could know it. We wanted, instead, to create a place that might cause at least some kids to envy us for the life we led, and to want to join our club. Growing up ought to seem attractive, after all. We decided that students needed lots of opportunities to practice science, not just to hear about it; to be writers, not just do writing exercises; to read books, not just practice becoming readers; as well as to do history, make ideas, and care about their world by working in it.

We began in a muddle ourselves; we weren't sure what the final product might look like. We didn't have the rich examples that were available when we began our elementary schools. There were progressive high schools, but they were generally elite institutions that solved problems by selecting the kids who fit. We didn't intend to limit ourselves to families who believed in progressive theories, or to kids who were already independent learners, or prepared for "our kind" of school. We wanted to demonstrate that all or any of our East Harlem kids deserved and could benefit by the kind of schooling that only 5 to 10 percent of our nation's children had hitherto received. We knew this was a scary proposition; that we wouldn't get it right immediately. However, we felt the challenge was worth taking. We solaced ourselves by saying that the alternative for most of our kids couldn't be worse, so why not try to make it better.

To start, we acknowledged three cardinal principles: (1) everything is connected, we couldn't just change one thing and leave the rest alone; (2) one could never attend to only one thing at a time, common sense to the contrary—we couldn't take up Sizer's nine principles in order, one this year and the rest later, we would have to tackle them all at once; and (3) all solutions have unintended side effects and we couldn't resolve all the side effects at the same time. We realized that the third principle contradicted the first and second. We would have to learn by doing. What we did was bound to be partly wrong. We would not be able to put it right until it had worked itself out in ways we couldn't anticipate.

We needed to be bold and revolutionary on one hand. On the other, we needed to remember that all human beings—adolescents above all—cherish conformity and familiarity. For lasting change to occur, we had to imbed the new into the old and build the future on the past. If we made too few changes, we'd find ourselves slipping back; if we made too many changes too fast, we'd lose the confidence of our families and students, and cause unproductive anxiety.

We would survive only if we could build a foundation of mutual respect and trust among the adult faculty, between the school and its students, and between the school and the students and their families. Such a foundation couldn't be built overnight. There would be setbacks and traumas. In the long run a solid foundation was essential. We had to do it with families who normally expected to be told—almost to their relief—"Forget it. Your children are teens now. Your role is over. Go home." But we were saying the opposite: "Your kids need you as much as ever, only differently." We were also telling them: "Don't second-guess us all the time. Trust us even if you don't always agree." In short, we were going to have to be compromisers while also being uncompromising; steadfast and yet flexible; reassuring and also open to doubt.

Teachers can't educate if they don't have the respect of their students and their families. They can't get such respect if they don't give it. They can't give it if they don't have a chance to get to know each other. We needed to find

ways to figure out how our kids were interpreting their lives and our school, what they were attending to and what they were ignoring, and how they made sense of the world "out there." To do this meant we had to greatly reduce the ratios between teachers and students—without enormously increased finding. We had to find a way of going from the usual high school arrangement where a teacher "sees" 150 to 160 students a day, to something closer to what elementary school people know is already too high—40 to 80 students daily. Oddly, high school teachers think these smaller figures are some utopian ideal. We knew that these ratios were necessary, but in and of themselves hardly sufficient.

To learn to use one's mind well one must be placed in an environment where, at the very least, the adults are doing that. We knew that teachers needed to make decisions about almost everything critical to their work, and have control over the major forces affecting their daily school lives. Time and structure for collegiality needed to be built into the day without being an add-on or a time-waster. Teachers needed time to see each other in a variety of contexts, interdisciplinary as well as intradisciplinary. Teachers who worked with the same kids needed to talk about kids; teachers who were teaching the same subject needed to discuss subject and pedagogy, and all teachers needed time to work out school-wide issues. Decisions would have to be made quickly and efficiently, circumventing vast arrays of committees, subcommittees, delegated bodies, representatives, and task forces. We needed a schedule so simple that we could focus on what was the real complexity—kids. We needed to make democratic life a pleasure, not another exercise in bureaucratic life. Staff empowerment would be so attractive that teachers could get on with teaching and wouldn't long for top-down mandated school administration.

In fact, teacher empowerment had to stop being the goal and become a necessary prerequisite for the real reforms—a changed relationship between teachers, learners, and subject matter. The case for having schools run by those who work in them is not a matter of principle. Many different parties to our society have equally valid rationales for school governance roles. The rationale for the empowerment of the school's staff rests upon assumptions about the nature of being human, the aims of democratic education, and the connections between means and ends. The importance of the teacher's role in school decision making rests upon the simple fact that there isn't another way to do "it." People work best when they're valued; to be valued requires respect and respect requires being "listened to." But there's no point in listening to people who can't do anything about what they hear. Expert teachers aren't valuable if they can't exercise their expertise.

People are never powerless, of course. Empowerment is perhaps an inaccurate term. Even devalued and disrespected people remain powerful, but they are forced to exercise their powers in odd, distorted, and limited ways. You can't make people powerless, but you can remove many of the choices

and options available for the exercise of their powers, the way they can show what they think and feel, and want. Children have been exercising their powers for years, without the formal right to do so. Ditto for teachers. Teachers know how limited their powers are; how the best and most wonderful lesson plan in the world is helpless in the face of real live kids. Teachers are in the same position. They can sabotage the best-laid reforms.

We shouldn't bemoan this. It's a saving grace. A virtue! It's our humanity we're describing and protecting, and it keeps us from being brainwashed by every dictator who comes to power. When we feel helpless we hide our mistakes, avoid exposure, resent outsiders, and play dumb. We pay a heavy price for such helplessness, but we do so whenever we suspect we'll play an even bigger price for not engaging in such sabotage. Teachers, like many of our fellow citizens, sabotage reforms—the best and the worst—when they feel imposed upon and helpless.

When we don't tap the knowledge and intelligence of those who know our schools best, our reforms are endlessly repetitive. We are bound to invent unworkable reforms until we trust practitioners. Of course, reform is also going to be unworkable until practitioners trust parents, and both extend greater trust to students. Similarly, only respected practitioners truly extend their provisional trust to other experts whose ideas may help inform their work. A mighty team emerges once we can all hear each other. It takes many viewpoints to see what's really happening.

If I hire a babysitter and I want to increase the odds of my child's safety, I need to create conditions that encourage the sitter to use intelligence and good judgment. This is as true for babysitting as it is for teaching. We have to act *as if* we trust the babysitter, hoping we've done a good job checking out references beforehand, spending sufficient time going over mutual concerns, providing him or her with the appropriate tools and resources, and leaving little reason for the sitter to be afraid to call for help. It won't improve the odds if we hem this sitter in with lots of laws, threaten dire penalties if things go wrong, and tell the kids to keep their eyes open because the sitter may be dangerous. So too with teachers.

That's why we need "teacher power"—not as a reward for our good behavior, not because we've proven to be professionals, not in return for a wage increase or merit pay, but merely because it's an essential prerequisite for sound education. Parents must have the same opportunities they have in hiring babysitters. They need to be able to check the school's references, observe the school in operation, and interview the staff. They have a right to be sure that the school has the appropriate tools and that its teachers can call for help without being afraid. As in choosing babysitters, parents need educational choices—because you and I may not agree on who's the best sitter in town. Only then is it fair to ask them to offer provisional trust, not too much and not too little. There's an acceptable level of trust without which

schools cannot do right by children. That right amount generally takes time to develop.

At Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), teachers needed a framework that enabled them to know their students well, and to know that their students and parents were offering them at least a provisional trust and respect. Because families came to us by choice, at least some modest basis for mutual trust was built into the system. Teachers also needed to know what they were expected to teach, and how their teaching and kid's learning would be assessed. We refused to let our work be judged on the basis of our students' capacity to collect trivia, but instead wanted it to be judged on intellectual habits of mind, such as the demonstrable capacity to weigh evidence, take on more complex responsibilities, make difficult judgements, and see finer distinctions. We wanted to demand improved performance at real, worthwhile tasks. We needed to devote ourselves to covering less, not more, and to develop standards that were no less tough and no less rigorous; not lower, but different.

Respect between children's families, their community, and the school is an end in itself, as well as an essential means to the education we had in mind. Education isn't merely a question of good and frequent contact between school and family. The gap between the social, ethnic, and class histories of the school's staff and the school's families is often substantial. It's a gap we cannot bridge entirely. However, at minimum parents need to know that we will not undermine their authority, their values, or their standards. They need to believe that we're not frustrating the aspirations they have for their kids, nor blaming them for what goes wrong for their kids.

When school people complain that parents don't show up at Parent/Teacher Conferences, especially in high schools, I remember my own experiences as a parent attending school conferences. At best, the teachers restated what I already knew: my child was doing fine. Bad news at the conference was more than useless. I left such meetings feeling more inadequate, more guilty, and more helpless. I learned to stop going. It was an act of intelligence and survival, not lack of concern, that led me to stay away. Without an adequate level of trust, children pay the sometimes paralyzing price. Children are stuck between the two suspicious, warring parties to their education—their parents and their teachers.

At CPESS we tried to reverse this distrust. One obvious first step was to create a small rather than a large school. My own high school had under 500 students, but in New York's public schools anything under 2,000 is small. To them, 500 is hardly a school at all. Fortunately, we existed in decentralized District #4, which already had a sympathetic view toward smallness. We were also buttressed by a current interest in smallness and considerable research about small schools. Finally, we had 10 years of District #4 experience to show us how to have small schools in big buildings. District #4 has 20 buildings and

52 schools. A building is not a school. More than one school can be located in a single building. Our high school building houses nearly a thousand students, but there are three schools in one building, not one.

Our high school enrollment—actually 450—is too big. Maybe we should have remained smaller, but instead we settled on subdividing. (Incidentally, 450 kids can fit into our auditorium, which is not a bad criteria for maximum size. The other useful criteria is whether or not the entire staff can fit into a single room, preferably in a single circle.) We subdivided the school into three major Divisions, each with about 150 kids. The Divisions are further subdivided into two Houses of 75 to 80 students. A House has its own faculty of four or five staff members, thus a Division has a faculty of about nine teachers covering all the basic subjects. Most teachers also teach more than a single discipline, so we can combine courses such as math and science. We have cut the number of children teachers see each day from 160 to only 40. The 40 includes about 15 students who teachers see daily for an extended Advisory period.

Students spend two years in each division. Division I is the equivalent of grades seven and eight, and Division II consists of grades nine and ten. The last division, called the Senior Institute, lasts as long as students need to get a diploma and be prepared for the next step in their lives. Within each Division, no distinctions are made by grade level; everyone takes the same courses together.

We decided on the simplest of schedules: two hours each day in Humanities (art, history, literature, social studies), two hours daily of Math/Science, and one hour of something we call Advisory. That's it, folks—day after day, with virtually no change for the first four years, from grades seven to 10. Some kids attend Humanities first, while the others have Math/Science; then it reverses. Within each two-hour block, the staff makes whatever decisions it wants about time and grouping. They can decide to do one thing on Monday and change their minds on Tuesday. When the kids and teachers complained that no one seemed really prepared to study hard after lunch, we all grumbled about it until the kids suggested a simple solution: no after lunch. So we run four hours straight, eat lunch late, and put Advisory at the end of the day. Everyone prefers it, at least for now. This was a decision we were able to make on Monday and put into effect within the same week. In most New York high schools, it would take a task force months to study an idea like this and months or years to put it into effect. But we just sat in our circle, listened to the kids' proposal, and said, "Let's try it."

Actually, there is one day a week in which the kids' and teacher's schedules differ. One morning per week each student spends half a day in community service, which allows for collegial planning time. Also, between 8:00 and 9:00 each morning we offer foreign language—with a mostly auxiliary staff of Spanish language teachers. The kids think 8:00 A.M. is outrageously early and they are still giving us a hard time about promptness. But being on time is a

necessity for our kind of schedule, so we aren't budging. Besides, we've discovered that most kids in America start high school at such an early hour. This logic has not yet been persuasive, however.

We also have an hour for lunch, longer than is typical. It gives the staff time together, and it gives the students time to eat, attend options such as sports and computer classes, as well as use the library for independent study. Finally, from 3:00 to 5:00 P.M. the building is open for sports programs, study and homework in the well-staffed library, and a few student-initiated clubs. This kind of schedule is not only simple, but it also provides time for faculty to meet and talk to each other—to do collegially what people who work together need to do.

We are creating a staff-run school with high standards—the staff must know each other well, be familiar with each other's work, and know how the school operates. Each team of teachers that works with the same students and the same curriculum teaches at the same time. The school's structure, from the placement of classes to the scheduling of the day, is organized to enable teachers to visit each other's rooms, to reflect on their own and their colleagues' practice, and to give each other full support. Curricular teams (four to five people), for example, have a full morning each week to plan together. For the same reason, those who teach the same kids—the faculty of each House—have an hour and a half extended lunch together every week. The entire staff meets from 3:00 to 5:00 P.M. every Monday to make collective, school-wide decisions and discuss ideas. Thus, decisions are made by curricular teams, Houses, Divisions, or when appropriate, at school-wide meetings. The staff is responsible for hiring their own members, assessing their own colleagues, and when dissatisfied, for confronting colleagues with their concerns. They are responsible for developing and assessing both the curriculum and their students' success with it. Above all, the teachers are responsible for defining the criteria for receiving a CPESS diploma. Together, this constitutes a powerful staff development project.

Every visitor who comes to CPESS has trouble accepting our claim that our students are a typical cross-section of New York City. But it's a fact. The students are largely African-American and Latino; about 15 percent are white, and a few are Asian. Twenty percent come to us designated as "in special need" of additional services, mostly with a label of learning disabled. Many are students who would otherwise qualify for self-contained special education classes. There is no easy way to distinguish such students in our school. In addition, two out of three students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches: read "poor." About half of our incoming seventh graders spent at least part of their elementary years at one of the three Central Park East schools; the others attended more typical public elementary schools.

We're getting more comfortable with what we're doing and so are our students. There are plenty of unresolved issues. How do we know if we've devel-

oped sufficiently high standards for graduation? What does it mean to tell kids the content of their final exam at the beginning of a course? How can we deal with questions of racism—even among ourselves as a staff—honestly and yet carefully? How can we insure that we don't tear ourselves apart as we pick our way through dangerous waters? We must solve these issues if we are to help kids who desperately need to be able to talk with adults about such things. How does democratic school governance work? What are the limits on a faculty's legitimate rights to make decisions versus the necessary controls exercised by a community, school board, or parent organization? In what capacity, and at what age, should students play a role in governing their own schools?

These are just a few of the unresolved issues. Many will never be resolved. But as we struggle with them we've seen dramatic changes. The deep immersion in a value system that places mutual respect first and encourages a climate of diversity and disagreement is enormously powerful over time. The kids know we're serious. Sometimes we fear that they are just parroting our ideas, but mostly we can't help but be impressed. They are less engaged in battling with us over every imposed limit on their freedom, and more engaged with us in the battle to become well educated. They get down to business faster and are more cheerful about more things. They read and write a lot. They talk a lot about their own learning and schooling. Yes, it's partly glibness, but even the glibness is a triumph.

Is it working? We've grown accustomed to that question. Our answer is not always satisfying. We don't yet have data on the high school graduates, achievement tests, or college acceptances. We generally rely on classroom observation and discussion with students. The limited data we have, however, looks promising. It's hardly surprising that our rate of retention is very high. Students neither transfer, nor move, nor drop out. Attendance is extraordinarily high. Kids and parents show up at family conferences, complain about things to our faces, and risk the necessary confrontations. We think that's a plus. The children are willing to let us catch them acting like nice young people who want to be smart. By tenth grade, they say "I'm bored" a bit less, and admit to being interested in the idea of becoming truly well-rounded citizens.

All this reinforces our belief that what makes a school good for the least advantaged is no mystery. It's not much different from a good school for the most advantaged. We don't need research on this astounding proposition. The main difference between the advantaged and the disadvantaged is that the latter need good schools even more. When people think "those kids" need something special, the reply we offer at CPESS is: "Just give them what you have always offered those who have the money to buy the best, which is mostly a matter of respect." After society does that, then let's talk "special."

Schools face obvious burdens when children come from families without social, political, and economic power; but such schools also face some less obvious hazards. Young people coming from families that have suffered from

severe forms of powerlessness and disrespect need a school that offers more than ordinary reasons for why they should try to join what psychologist Frank Smith (1988) calls "the literacy club" (p. 3). Unless we make that club very attractive, students are unlikely to join it. Unless it appears to be a club that accepts people "like them," they are not likely to view it as a serious option. If they expect to be excluded anyway, they're likely to avoid rejection by rejecting it first. Above all, if belonging to this literacy club requires quitting all the other clubs they know of and now belong to, particularly those their parents and loved ones are members of, then the takers will be few. We could, on the other hand, offer them a family membership plan. Or, at least, we could assure them that people can belong to lots of different clubs. They might be more willing to join if we assured them that choosing one club does not mean having to drop all the others.

I think we've created a framework at CPESS to tackle these questions, day by day. I don't know how far we'll get in answering them, or the degree of success we can expect. We don't create all the conditions; I can't stop the world they live in while we do our work. That world beyond our control places crushing burdens on far too many of our young people. We have no guarantees to offer our kids, our families, or the wider public beyond trying our best to make CPESS a place that at least temporarily makes life seem more interesting and more worth the effort.

Several events have reinforced my confidence that we're on the right track. I had the good fortune to drop in on the ninth and tenth graders as they were presenting their scenes from *Macbeth* in the school auditorium. They had spent many months working over their ideas about the play, and now they were presenting these ideas to each other. The keen sense of ownership they displayed over the material was astounding to me. It was the product of the kind of leisurely pacing only a school like ours can afford, and they were able to show it off to each other without fear of being ridiculed. They knew that the laughter from the audience was the laughter of colleagues working with, not against them. It was a wonderful few hours.

Another confirmation came under less happy circumstances. The infamous, so-called "wilding" assault on a Central Park jogger occurred just a few blocks from our building. That event had a particularly powerful impact on the sensitivities of East Harlem residents. As I came to school after the four-day holiday in which the assault occurred, I knew one thing: we needed time to work out together how to deal with the youngsters' reactions. The staff met at lunch to talk about what the kids were saying, and how we might respond. We knew we had to address not only the children's reactions, but our own fears and angers. We had to face our different responses and learn from them. We also had to help kids deal with a hungry press, and to prevent their unwitting exploitation as cameras, microphones, and newsmen with pencils and pads pushed into their lives in order to get first-hand "reactions." Our

response, atypical for a New York City high school, was based on our ability to set priorities. Our size, our simple schedule, and our collegial organization made this feasible.

Then came the third event: the death of one of the most beloved members of our larger school community, Josie Hernandez. Her children were in our first graduating class fifteen years ago. She had become the secretary at one of our elementary schools eight years ago. She was important to all of us in many different ways. Her sudden death could not go by unnoted. We stopped to take stock of her life and its meaning. We knew we had to respond to her death, personally and individually. We had to be sure that those students who had known her could attend her memorial service. We had to pay attention to details, not just good intentions.

We could do such things not because more caring than other teachers or other schools. Not at all. It's because we have a structure and style that enables us to show our care effectively. What could a high school principal with 4,000 students possibly do in the face of such a situation? In such schools, a death a day is commonplace. To take cognizance of individual tragedies would be to lapse into a state of perpetual grief and mourning. The distancing and numbing required in most schools is a fact of life, a necessary coping strategy.

If we want children to be caring and compassionate, then we must provide a place for growing up in which caring is feasible. Creating such intimate schools is possible even in our existing system of large buildings. That's what I think the visitors who come to our schools recognize and acknowledge. That is what is visibly obvious.

It's harder to convince people that what we do is do-able by others—in their own way. People often have a whole string of “well, buts” for why our situation is different than theirs. I want to argue strongly that it is not Deborah Meier, not our unique staff, not extra funds that makes us different. It's our wanting it badly enough. Principals come and say: “Ah, but you have only 500 students. I could do it too if I only had 500.” I say, terrific, you can divide your building into a bunch of smaller schools and you too will have schools of only 500. They say: “Well, you have so much more freedom than I do.” I remind them that no one actually gave it to me or to us. We have what we took. They say: “You have an unusual staff.” I agree, but it's not because they went to unusual colleges, taught longer, or have exceptional gifts. What's unusual is that they are practicing what they believe in. And me? If I'm unusual it's because I had the perseverance to put up with a tenaciously irritating bureaucracy, and still keep trying to put into practice the concerns and convictions of a kindergarten teacher. That kindergarten perspective is replicable, too. It's a perspective that does not merely tolerate, but exults in diversity.

If what we've done is to have wider applicability, we need to look upon our story as an example, not a model. We'll need to be tolerant toward the

different strategies for change that friends and colleagues try out. We need to insist that there cannot be just one right, perfectly crafted, expertly designed solution. Good schools, like good societies and good families, celebrate and cherish this diversity. Since we don't know the ending ahead of time, life's unpredictability is a given. After accepting some guiding principles and a firm direction, we must say hurrah, not alas, to the fact that there is no single way toward a better future.

What makes me hopeful about life, no matter what tomorrow brings, is our infinite capacity for inventing the future. It's what allows me to remain optimistic even though there's presently more racism and more hostility to the poor in my home town than I've witnessed in a long time. There are opportunities out there; things are stirring. It's up to us to come out of the cocoon we built during the 1970s and early 1980s to protect and nurture our fragile educational practices, and join in the fray for a more powerful democratic schooling.

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