Education for Democracy
Interview with Deborah Meier, by Harry Boyte

Deborah Meier, Founder of Central Park East Schools in East Harlem, has become internationally known as an eloquent theorist and practitioner of democratic education. She is recipient of the MacArthur Award and a co-founder of the Coalition for Essential Schools, among many achievements.

HB: You said you’ve been working on conceptual language for a long time, exploring how to claim and name what you know. Where did you start?

DM: As soon as I started teaching in Chicago, I started asking why is it organized the way it is? I also had children and that stimulated my thinking about how we come to “know” the world.

HB: You once told me a story about seeing a parent take her child to the door of the school. The teacher took the child and said, “Okay, now we take over.”

DM: Yes, I remember. I had been raised in progressive schools in New York. When I started working in schools in Chicago, it was a shock to me. The whole nature of the schools and their assumptions struck me as requiring an explanation other than, “this is the only way it could be done.”

About that time I also took courses at a local junior college. I was exposed to schooling directed at me of a type I had never experienced before. So on three levels, as a parent, as a teacher, and as a student in college I was treated disrespectfully in a way that was unacceptable, as though it were the norm.

It all fit in with my feeling that one of the reasons the country was in the shape it was had to do with the fact that people who spent six to twelve years in such schools didn’t have a sense of their intellectual competence. No one had ever honored their ideas. No one had ever said, “you’re a person with ideas, and you’re capable and intellectual.” Or at least in the public sphere, no one representing the larger world. Maybe someone in their family had. When they baked a pie, someone said, “It’s a marvelous pie.” But no one in the public world, in the official world out there, had acknowledged that most had something worth saying. That’s why my book is called, The Power of Their Idea—not the power of MY or OUR ideas.

Schools are places that influence our notions of whether we can influence the larger world. The whole way the enterprise was organized was to say to kids, “You come to us with nothing. You have nothing, your family has nothing.”

It was a also time in which there was a lot of interest in educating poor children, and that effort was organized around the same notion, that the problem with these kids was that they had parents who didn’t know how to educate them. The school had to give them language, and give them experiences, teach them a vocabulary. The parents had to be educated. Parents didn’t know how to treat their children. Parents didn’t know how to raise kids. Schools had to educate parents to educate their children.
HB: I remember you describing how you all discovered that teachers had to unlearn what they learned in teachers’ college, that the important thing was the teaching technique. More important was the concept that parents could be partners. Where did that come from?

DM: Partly, I imagine, because I was treated that way. But it also was a time of civil rights, and I was working in schools. Here we were saying that ordinary citizens could change the world but they were considered too stupid to raise their children. This was still in Chicago.

Even progressive-minded teachers felt that way. I saw the degree to which schools made parents feel that they were inept. Even middle class parents came to feel when their children were a very early age, “I can’t teach my child this.”

What I said to you in our conversation was, “there may be a better way to learn to read, or a better way to learn math, but I’d rather have a parent teach their child wrong than think they’re too stupid to teach their five year old how to add.” While it’s true that I wish I could convince them to teach their kid to add my way, the worst thing I could do was teach their kid to look at their parent and think, “my parents are too stupid to add. I’m not allowed to ask my mother. I have to wait until my teacher can teach me.”

There is real harm done, and it’s a very hard thing to convince people of. Parents play into it too. Tonight at the school we were having a meeting with parents on how we teach writing. A lot of the questions directed at us were, in essence, “When my kid does X at home, what should I do?” I told teachers, “We ought to organize a meeting around that because I don’t want you to tell the parents what they should do. I want you to say, ‘Listen, you’re probably capable of figuring that out.’ Why don’t parents organize some discussion groups among themselves?”

I as a teacher have no expertise on what you should do when you’re trying to cook and your child asks something. I’m not an expert on that topic.

Now, I think I convinced them not to answer those questions, but I think it was only because we didn’t have time to answer certain questions. I don’t think that even the staff at our school realize how damaging it is for us to impose ourselves as experts in all domains. Most of my staff have no kids. Why would they be an expert about what to do when you’re trying to cook dinner and your kid won’t do his homework?

HB: That’s a deeply political perspective, in the richest sense of politics as negotiation among different interests and ways of looking at the world. You’re being attentive to power and authority and interests and context and negotiations -- all sorts of questions that are political. Did you think about it that way, or in terms of education?

DM: I thought about it all of those ways. I don’t think I made those distinctions—politics vs. education. The implicit politics of schools is what first intrigued me about schools. I thought about the power relations partly in terms of how disrespectful it was, and how insulted I felt when some young teachers started giving me advice about having a table for my children’s homework. I thought, “Do you really think I haven’t heard that before? I need you to tell me they need a space?” I felt deeply insulted by teachers giving me advice in places where I thought they really had no business. In fact, I thought there were a lot of things about school that I knew as much as they did. There was something disrespectful in the relationship they had with me. I felt,
“My God, I have so many things going for me and I feel humiliated. What must it be like for people who are not so sure that they are important? What does it do to their kids to see them treated that way?” Teachers get mad at them for not coming to family conferences or to school, but why would they come to school if family conferences were so humiliating? What they had experienced as kids they see reenacted again in front of them as parents.

HB: You’re talking about identity change on the part of teachers, from being an outsider to a much more collaborative role, more interactive, more open, not having all the answers. How did you learn to work with teachers around that change?

DM: I had to first work with myself around that, around the power anxieties, around the kinds of tensions within schools. Seymour Sarason has written a lot about these two groups of women, mainly, women teachers and women parents and the rivalries and insecurities they both have. Both are vulnerable. Both are afraid that they’re going to be attacked and blamed.

HB: I saw that when we had public forums with teachers and low-income parents. They both felt vulnerable.

DM: It happens as well with high-income parents. Helen, on our staff, thinks it’s even worse with high-income parents because they’re more of a threat to teachers. Teachers need to fall back on “my professionalism” even more. It’s the only part of the relationship that makes them equal to parents. Otherwise parents have more power, more money. The only place they can hold their ground, without being patronized by parents, is the identity they have as professionals.

It’s one of the things I think the small schools movement doesn’t recognize: a reason for opposition from teachers to small schools is that they’re much more vulnerable. It’s like my office question. If you have to go through my secretary to get an appointment, there are a lot of levels before I’m vulnerable. In a school like this, Mission Hill, it’s too easy to be vulnerable. At nine o’clock in the morning they’re walking down the hall and a parent comes up and asks them an uncomfortable question. And they ask when they’re off-centered for a moment. So they get in trouble. Part of them longs for a place where there’s more bureaucracy, and they’re not so vulnerable, and a parent can’t walk into the class when I happen to be yelling at a kid.

HB: How do teachers collectively work on this problem?

DM: I think if teachers had more confidence in their relationship with each other and with the work they do, if they didn’t feel so powerless, and they were expected to have authority about the work they do it would help. But at the same time, when they get respect, they also have to give it. They have to assume that parents have a domain. So you need some domains. Each needs a place where they have some authority. And after all neither of us has much time for this collaboration. There has to be some kind of mutual power between us that we have to recognize. Some of it has to be by rules, where you recognize certain jurisdictional power.

HB: Something formal?

DM: Something they can formally fall back on even though 98% of the time it’s informally collaborative. There are risks if there aren’t some rules.
HB: Does it also involve finding ways for teachers and parents to work together?

DM: Yes. In some ways the most difficult thing is the lack of time. We tried for two years to have one night every month where we would provide supper and parents and kids could come. We did it by houses, and clusters of classes. Parents decided it was too much, so we cut it down this year to only six. Tonight isn’t considered one of them, it’s something different. Different parents have different things they like to come to. That’s nice, but the trouble is they want to see the same teacher.

Leaving aside these evenings, the normal working life of a teacher in our school is fifty hours. And I don’t think it’s so much different in other schools. This is the normal. You add to that evening meetings, and sometimes a Saturday thing. Sometimes you write a report, that’s extra. And that’s assuming you don’t give out too much homework. If you give out two hours of homework each night to fifty or sixty kids and you spent two minutes on each kid, that’s two hours. It’s assuming you’re not doing that kind of homework, but now the mark of a good teacher is giving homework. But if you’re going to give two hours of homework, you have to give feedback.

So, there is a tension between the teaching life and leisure. If you read kids’ writing you should be thoughtful, and take time, and be amused by this or that. We haven’t built schools, even our school, so that comes easily, so that we have time to treat each other in respectful ways. There is no other institution, practically, in which people deal with each other in such interchangeable, bureaucratic ways. Teachers are most of the time dealing with twenty kids and trying to figure out how to have the same goals for each of the twenty kids. This is how kids get trained about public life. They have twelve years of experience being treated as interchangeable parts.

HB: One of the other aspects of your schools I’ve always been impressed with is a much more authentic and real public life, a life that deals with conflict, with particularity, with messiness.

DM: Thanks; we do try. We have created institutions of the sort that it’s an uphill battle to defend messiness and conflict. I don’t know the key for sure, but it’s important that the teachers involved all love the life of the school. For many of them it’s their first experience of being members of an interesting community. It’s not boring. They treasure that. The turnover rate is very low. It’s not only a caring community, it’s also an interesting community.

HB: I’ve been impressed in seeing your schools at the way you surface conflict, you don’t avoid tension.

DM: Well, it certainly makes it interesting. It’s never boring. It’s never without point, never without purpose. When teachers find the place interesting that gives us a shot at creating a place that might also be interesting for kids. Even just witnessing, being in the company of adults who find life interesting has to rub off. We have this bizarre idea that we want to raise kids to be effective adults without ever watching adults being effective. In most schools kids never see adults together. They don’t see adults talking. They don’t know how adults make decisions. They don’t know how adults arrive at things. They don’t know how adults think aloud. It’s impossible in our school to get through the day without hearing adults talking with each other, aside from talking to them. They’re aware when our meetings are taking place. They know where they take place. They are enormously aware that there is an adult life going on here that has something to
do with them, but is different. We have our books to read, we have our notices up. On Saturdays teachers go down to a workshop together. There is all this adult interaction.

HB: How did you come to stress the idea of “work,” learning or education as work, rather than instruction?

DM: Sometimes I think I should think of it as play. It is in many ways very playful. It’s work as play or play as work, versus instruction

First of all, instruction is not how human beings learn. I came to that conclusion because it’s not how I learn. I knew most of what I learned in the company of others. I learned from my family from listening to dinner table conversations. All sorts of people came to the house, and I was allowed to stay up late and listen to them. I joined a political world in which I listened to the arguments of other people. I learned a model of the most powerful learning being when you’re in the company of adults who take you seriously, or other kids who take you seriously. You’re successively being invited into a club, which is an interesting club to join, which you’d like to join.

HB: I can see the experiential dimension, but how did you come to name things, like naming education as work, or naming education as habits? How do you come to name your practice?

DM: I took a lot of it from the world of politics. I also took part of it from my own Jewish tradition, where you learn at the feet of elders, an apprenticeship. It’s an intellectual apprenticeship, but it’s not so different than a shoemaker’s apprentice. This is an apprenticeship about ideas, the way you learn things is to be with others. That was a very strong part of my background, but what is intriguing to me is how exciting it is for adults who did not experience that. I don’t think virtually any of the adults in our school grew up in a setting like I did. Actually, I shouldn’t say they grew up in a world of ideas. They didn’t know they grew up in a world like that. Now that I know Brian better I think that he learned a lot about ideas from his father and his older brothers. It wasn’t self-conscious. They wouldn’t have said that’s what they were doing, whereas that was part of my parents’ tradition. The Debs quote, “I wouldn’t lead you to the promised land, because then somebody could lead you out of it,” was a consciously named idea about politics. The challenge is finding a way of describing that, a way that doesn’t assume everybody will be a socialist, how to speak to something broader than any such label. Most people would like to be treated that way.

People learn most of what matters from the context of relationships, not from instruction. And most of what they learned from instruction they forget. There’s no way to really teach language from instruction. You have to go somewhere where they speak it and speak it. Probably it’s true of most other subjects too.

HB: Tell me about the development of your concept of habits as what one aims for and what one evaluates in education.

DM: The idea of learning habits has origins in Dewey and others. He talks about habits of mind. He doesn’t use it exactly the way I use it but it’s close. He doesn’t specify the habits. But it was hanging around in my mind.
Specifically it came when we tried to figure out portfolio requirements for Central Park East Secondary School. We said, if somebody is going to present their qualifications in history, what would we expect? We knew we didn’t want to say they knew the following list of facts—and it was hard to agree on what to put on that list if we weren’t going to make it so long that we wouldn’t have time to teach anything else. We thought, how much simpler it would be if we could find some things, some traits that crossed domains of academic subjects, and were also traits that you’d use in the real world. So we brainstormed. We also decided we wanted five, because it would otherwise get too complicated. You could have lists of hundreds. The one we use now is not the original five, but it’s close. One of the original, as I recall, had to do with boundaries and borders. Someone wanted cause and effect. I was at a point in my life where I was more interested in patterns. Cause and effect is one pattern. I wanted one but I never could figure out a way to get it in. That was, “compared to what?” It used to drive me crazy, people would say this is the worst thing I ever saw. “Compared to what?”

HB: Putting it in context?

DM: Yes, precisely, putting it in context. I still find it a very useful question. So, kids will say “this isn’t a democracy,” and I’ll say, “You’re right, but what were you comparing it to?”

First of all, we listed all the things on the board that each one of the teachers thought should be the basis of judgment, either facts or skills. We got to the third blackboard and we’d only got two of the subject areas. The neat thing was how many of these you could think of in terms of literature or math or another subject.

The point is habits are about life. What are the habits in school that you need anyplace else. Schools should be seen as preparation for life, not preparation for more school? The problem with a test is that it predicts how you will do on the next test. Whereas if you think the life of a school is not a preparation, but a model. What are the habits in school you would need anyplace else?

HB: I can remember four: Relevance (so what?); viewpoint; connection; evidence?

DM: Conjecture. Supposing that… Each of them serves some democratic as well as an academic purpose. The world could be different. But it comes up in any discipline. And like the other five it is clearly relevant to the life of a school, to creating a community. If your response to everything is “it had to be that way” then you can’t take responsibility.

Most of these we realize we were using the same language to mean many things. Even the viewpoint question, it’s having one yourself, but also recognizing the other guy’s position. It’s not just knowing, it’s being able to step in the shoes of another.

I sometimes feel I could boil it all down to two public virtues, which are informed empathy and informed skepticism. Skepticism is the capacity to imagine you might be wrong. You need to be open to that possibility. What I’m seeing may not be what it really is. The world may not quite be the way I think it is.

The other side is being able to step into the shoes of other people. A form of the golden rule.
If you could do both, and even more, were in the habit of doing both, and… were curious about the world. I’d be very satisfied.

HB: Those are certainly political principles.

DM: They also make for a nice family life. They’re political virtues, but they’re also good for any group of human beings. Neither are innate human characteristics. It takes schooling of some sort to develop habits. You need habits when it isn’t natural. You need education to establish habits when they aren’t natural.

These are not unnatural for humans, but they’re not like learning to walk and talk. You don’t have to train somebody to walk. You don’t have to train people to identify with people who are just like yourself. But empathy for people who are not like yourself takes education. It’s uncomfortable. It’s much easier to avoid it.

HB: Some of these are clustered or related. It’s easier to develop appreciation for someone who makes you uncomfortable if you’re answering a “so what?” question about something large and important.

DM: Yes, they’re interrelated. But they’re all hard to do. They make us uncomfortable, which is the reason for the word, habit. I know where to put my keys. If I’m not under stress I think about it, but if I’m under stress, I would put them anywhere without habits.

Habits come into play when you’re under stress. Democratic culture needs citizens with very strong habits. The time when we need them most is the time when we’re least inclined to use them, like when someone flies into the World Trade Center. That’s the time you need good habits.

HB: The “so what?” question is in some ways the most radical habit, at least in our culture, it seems to me. We lose the practice of asking, why? We focus on techniques, how to’s, we don’t prioritize.

DM: Yes. People come and say, how do you know your high school works? I ask, what do you mean by “work”? They say, “You’re just trying to be evasive. Does it work?”

I say, “It’s not a toaster.” It’s the appliance metaphor that we use. We plug it in and it’s supposed to work. Someone said, “If it’s not worth doing, it’s not worth doing well.”

After the last election some people from Harvard asked my advice about how to make the Department of Education more effective. I said, “I might want it to be very ineffective. I’m not necessarily in favor of it’s being effective until I find out what it is they want to effect.” They were very annoyed at me. They all had lots of good advice.

HB: It’s T.S. Eliot, where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge.

DM: A nice summation of our habits. It’s amazing how hard to keep these kinds of habits in mind as we work. I sent out a memo to teachers saying, before you give homework you might ask yourself, which habit of mind does this have to do with? I’m really struck at how easily we
fall back into forgetting this point. Each year at the spring retreat, someone asks, do you think we should drop these habits? Are they window dressing?

In the memo I said, “Let’s really look at our work. It would be interesting to write at the top of the homework assignment, Which habit does this develop, for the kids’ education as well as your own? Maybe it addresses more than one?

For instance, the assignment might be, write a report on what your favorite animal is. But the question is, what habit does that develop? Now, picking your favorite animal and asking why it’s your favorite animal would be about expressing your viewpoint, and presenting some evidence, and considering relevance. But simply asking students to write a report on your favorite animal doesn’t necessarily develop habits of mind—although it might be focusing on writing habits. Even then, I know what many kids are going to do. They’re going to look on the web page and write up what they found.

HB: Where does the centrality of democracy come from in your life?

DM: It was there from birth on, from my family. My pride and patriotism and purpose in life were identified with the idea of democracy, social democracy. Democracy is a relationship of mutual respect between people, solidarity between people. Those things. It was a very strong commitment. It’s what made my parents unpopular anti-communists in the late thirties. Their definition of progress was expansion of democracy.

During World War II, we were not allowed to call the Japanese “Japs.” We were not allowed to show disrespect to any group. You could hate people, you could even hate them as evil, but you had to hate them as other human beings.

HB: Jane Addams once said the penalty of democracy is that we’re all part of the corruption. We advance or retreat together. She was envisioning the secession problem of professionals who took themselves out of a sense of being part of the common lot.

DM: Professionalism comes with that risk. I was reading an essay some years ago about why Freud is good for democracy. The point the author was making was that the understanding we gained from Freud was about how complicated motives are, and how little we understand about them—even our own. Recognizing that we don’t understand ourselves completely is part of the humility that makes us acknowledge that we don’t understand someone else completely either. The existence of hidden mysteries is an important constraint to our treating each other as objects.

This is the greatness of literature, that you can place yourself in the shoes of someone you would never want to be, or would reject in the normal course of life. It’s an extraordinary human capacity. That capacity exists, but what’s frightening is that people who love great literature don’t automatically translate this empathy into their own lives. The disjuncture is worth pondering. After all the Germans were a highly literate people!