

Jürgen Oelkers

In honor of Deborah Meier^{)}*

The Zurich University of Teacher Education is awarding a prize for outstanding contributions to public education. The prize is called “Bildungspreis.” The German word “Bildung” cannot be translated, so I will use the German term, “Bildungspreis.” Today the Prize is being awarded for the third time, and for the first time to a woman. This is also the first time that the Prize reaches beyond the boundaries of the canton and even the nation. This is not by chance. Today, “education” can be called a global project, in which more than ever before, countries learn, and must learn, from each other. We are no longer automatically the best; excellence is not simply historically guaranteed; and we need to do more than compare ourselves with other cantons. National education today is internationally oriented - so much so, Deborah Meier, that jet lag has become a distinguishing feature.

There are, of course, many different kinds of “contributions to public education.” Patronage is one kind, as are outstanding publications, or special achievements in research, or certainly development work for the schools. What is conspicuous is that practitioners seldom receive awards. We give prizes to the best students, universities name teachers of the year, and occasionally, sometimes even heads of universities of teacher education are honored, but practitioners mostly miss out. It seems that the work of teachers “pays” just in the form of their pay. There is hardly any public recognition for teachers, and teachers’ prizes, with ceremonies honoring them and large audiences attending, are not even briefly considered.

Today we honor a practitioner who was a teacher with her whole heart and all of her conviction and probably did not want to be anything else. However, this “not anything else” has quite a special meaning, because as her “About Me” page on her Web site tells us,

“She has spent more than four decades working in public education as a teacher, writer and public advocate.”¹

These descriptions of her activities are carefully chosen, for this is a teacher who places importance on having taught at public schools and who, at the same time, made an esteemed name for herself as a writer and wants to be seen as an advocate for public concerns.

Allow me to introduce Deborah Meier. She began her teaching career - quite appropriately - as a kindergarten teacher. Then she was an elementary teacher in various Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City schools, and she taught later also at the secondary level. As the founder of schools and as a political author she became known nation-wide. Her first home in publishing was a magazine whose name indicates the program, *Dissent* magazine. *Dissent* is the political publication of the American left, or of all who do not agree

^{*)} Laudatory speech on the occasion of the awarding of the PHZH (Zurich University of Teacher Education) Educational Prize (*Bildungspreis der Pädagogischen Hochschule Zürich*) to Deborah Meier on October 26, 2007.

¹ <http://www.deborahmeier.com/aboutme.htm>

with the mainstream. *Dissent* was launched in 1954 by Irving Howe² and others; today it is edited by Mitchell Cohen and Michael Walzer. It was in *Dissent* that Deborah Meier published her first articles.³

I quote her article “Learning not to learn” from the year 1968, that symbolic year that is often misunderstood today. I was also interested to see what Deborah Meier wrote the year that I began my studies at university. In the article, she poses the question as to whether schools are really the place that children learn, or whether perhaps the opposite is much more the case. “Reform” oriented early-childhood teachers would protest the very question. They often speak of “their” children, saying that of course they learn, and they learn “for them,” because they - the teachers - have established a positive relationship:

“But years of experience as just such a teacher convinces me that children are remarkably skillful at playing our game” (Meier, 1968, p. 545).

“Our game” is not “their game.” “Nowhere else,” Deborah Meier writes in 1968, “does a child depend less on his own ‘common sense,’ his own generalizations about life, than in the ghetto classroom” (p. 546). We want them to learn what is “right,” but that is something that they often do not find that in their own world of experience. She writes, “As a result children rarely expect that they will or should understand what we teach them” (p. 457). The school then all too easily implies that the child is lacking in some way. Nothing is easier than to ascribe deficits to children instead of starting out from their potentials. As Deborah Meier puts it,

“The child may be deprived of experiences we wish all children could have. But *ersatz* experiences are not a substitute. Our starting point must be the child’s own life” (p. 547).

The school is there for the children and not vice versa. This simple truth has direct consequences. For the first question must be not what noble goals the school pursues but rather what the schools in fact achieve or what damage they may cause. Again, in Deborah Meier’s words:

“If we intend to create a one-class educational system in America we must begin to look at not only what we are failing to teach children, but what the school, albeit often unintentionally, *is* teaching them” (p. 548).

These are powerful ideas. And unfortunately, they are ideas that I was not able to read in 1968. At university we read Herbert Marcuse, not Deborah Meier, and that makes a difference. Throughout my entire university studies, I did not hear the term *progressive education*, and the idea that the child’s own world must be the starting point for the school was dismissed as a naïve supposition. But enough of that.

With her powerful ideas Deborah Meier founded in 1974 an alternative elementary school within the public school system in New York City that was rapidly followed by two more schools, all of them in East Harlem. Known as “CPE,” these are the Central Park East Schools. The idea was to implement the best learning methods in a place where they were least expected and where it was actually clear that they could not succeed. And in fact, many of the progressive schools that were founded after the First World War were private schools

² Literary and social critic Irving Howe (1920-1993) edited *Dissent* magazine until his death in 1993.

³ Meier is today is on the editorial board of *Dissent* magazine.

for the white, middle-class child. Now, public schools in the ghettos or underprivileged neighborhoods were to be run as progressive schools.

In 1985 Deborah Meier founded Central Park East Secondary School, a New York City public high school that was conducted following the same principles of progressive education. She documented her experience at this school in her first book, published in 1995. The book carries the self-confident title,

***The Power of Their Ideas:
Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem.***

“Lessons for America” is meant also politically. The lessons are directed against the conservative turn in American educational policy that was set off with the alarming report of 1983, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). I have never understood the title of that report, for how can an entire nation be at the brink of the disaster of an educational crisis? And how could this be the case once again, 25 years after the Sputnik shock? This dramatic metaphor, according to which American education was “at risk,” had far-reaching consequences. The conservative turn led to the adoption of a new language, a language to which we have become accustomed, namely, the language of psychometrics and performance measurement, in which there seem to be only tests and standards. Against it, Deborah Meier sets the voice and wisdom of practice.

When I read the book in 1995, I gained the impression that the title allowed for two variations:

- the *Power* of Their Ideas
- and the Power of *Their* Ideas.

What is meant here are the students. Learning is problem-solving. If we want that students truly learn and are not merely tested, we have to rely on their power to solve problems but also trust in their independent solutions. The school lives on the ideas of the students; they are the sun around which the educational world turns.

That metaphor is not my own, unfortunately. I am citing John Dewey, who in 1889 in *The School and Society* spoke of the Copernican revolution in education, thereby thinking of the power of their ideas. Dewey was not only a philosopher but also the founder of schools. Dewey’s school, the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, was opened in 1896. It was a small school, and it represented a groundbreaking experiment that was rightly seen as practical proof of progressive ideas in education. However, this experiment would hardly have succeeded had not two women made sure that it was also practicable: John Dewey’s wife, Alice Chipman, and Dewey’s assistant, Ella Flagg Young, who would become the first female superintendent of the Chicago public schools (and of *any* major city school system).

You can see that in my talk today, women play the main role. Deborah Meier’s secondary school in New York was very successful with its progressive methods, for more than 90% of the entering students went on to college (Bensman, 2000) Artificial standards were as little necessary for this as “high stakes testing,” an expression that is not by chance taken from the game of poker. But students’ performance does not increase simply with the consequences that tests bring with them. School achievements improve when students see the sense of what they are learning and when they are given the freedom to decide what shape

their learning will take. Students are clever enough to circumvent testing; that, too, belongs to the power of their ideas.

Today, Deborah Meier is one of the most well-known persons in American education who is recognized internationally. She calls herself a learning theorist who “encourages new approaches that enhance democracy and equity in public education.” This is her concern, *democracy* und *equity of opportunity*. We have before us a political author who gets involved and takes a clear position. In contrast to many others that “get involved,” her concern does not remain at the theoretical level - it becomes practical. The school in East Harlem is part of a network in which many schools cooperate and work towards realizing a common philosophy.

In *The Power of Their Ideas*, Deborah Meier (1995) writes:

“Each of the ... schools offers a rich and interesting curriculum full of powerful ideas and experiences aimed at inspiring its students with the desire to know more, (and) a curriculum that sustains students’ natural drive to make sense of the world and trusts in *their* [italics added] capacity to have an impact upon it” (p. 16).

That does not work if conditions are bad, such as in the big inner city school factories in many large American cities. The secret of secret is thus small size, or a learning environment that knows no anonymity. Also and precisely children from not-privileged families have powerful ideas and are eager to learn, if we let them and is the school truly encourages them to learn.

From 1992 to 1996 Deborah Meier also served as co-director of the Coalition Campus Schools Project that successfully redesigned the reform of two large failing high schools in New York City. Failed schools are actually hopeless cases that exist in a social environment that reinforces all negative factors – youth violence, refusal to perform, dissocial behavior, drug abuse, and much more. The Project turned two failed bog schools into twelve successful small schools, in which there are real opportunities for low-income African-American and Latino students to be truly able to learn. Students *want to* learn, if they are looked at without society’s prejudices. The school must ensure that they *can* learn.

Here the issue of equity becomes concrete. In a society in which social segregation is almost inconceivably high as compared to conditions in Europe, practical models are needed that show what can be *done* with the prospect of success - so that more fairness is not just a topic for discussion. A part of the promise of democracy is that all children can go to public school with fair chances, without discrimination due to social background or gender. But this is easy to demand and very difficult to realize; this makes attempts that really show us the way all the more remarkable.

In 1997 Deborah Meier went to Boston, where she founded the Mission Hill School and served as principal for eight years. The Mission Hill School is pilot school within the Boston public school system serving children in grades K through 8. This school, too, is small, today with 170 children, who are taught following progressive methods. The class size is 20 children, and the groups are mixed in age. Most children stay with one and the same teacher for two years. All classrooms in grade 2 through 8 have computers with Internet access, and the school itself is networked. Graduates of the Mission School attend good high schools.⁴ Equity of opportunity depends upon high school quality. If we want children from

⁴ <http://www.missionhillschool.org/>

underprivileged families to overcome their social discrimination, we must offer them attractive schools.

The Mission Hill School is affiliated with the *Coalition of Essential Schools*.⁵ The Coalition is a part of the story that I tell this evening. It was founded in 1985 by Ted Sizer, who is today one of the foremost educational reformers in the United States. The goal of the Coalition school reform developed locally but sharing commitment to ten Common Principles on the purpose and practice of schooling. The Coalition now speaks in terms of networking. The history of the great *models* of school reform failed; when each school is different, each school can also only develop as a single unit. What is necessary are networks in which schools learn from each other, without implementing a master plan.

Together with Ted and Nancy Sizer, Deborah Meier published a book on keeping school in 2004, titled:

***Keeping School:
Letters to Families from Principals of Two Small Schools***
(Meier, Sizer, & Sizer, 2004).

The book documents principals' weekly letters to parents and is about how keeping school can be done responsibly, when confronted with the daily problems that seem insurmountable. What we read here is not plain statistics, not test scores, and not the results of yet another survey. Instead, we learn about efforts to run good schools, to keep schools transparent, and to integrate parents in responsible collaboration.

As senior scholar and adjunct professor, our award recipient is currently on the faculty of the Metro Center for Urban Education in New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. The Metro Center serves school development in school districts experiencing critical needs. The members of the Metro Center are a broad range of professors from various departments in the School of Education; they share their expertise and make it usable. Here things come full circle for Deborah Meier.

That is also true in another respect. *Will Standards Save Public Education?* is a question that she asked in a book published in 2000. She is at odds on policy with Diane Ravitch, who published a theory on educational standards in 1995 and afterwards wrote a staunch critique of progressive education. Here again, women play the leading roles. Today, Diane Ravitch and Deborah Meier are both on the faculty at the Steinhardt School of Education, one in research and one in development. They engage in ongoing debate, and what is more, they both write for a joint blog at the Web site of the journal *Education Week*. Their writings there are among the best that I could have read in preparation for this evening's award presentation. The blog is called "Bridging Differences," and if you read it, you will find far more than any mere "we agree to disagree."⁶

Deborah Meier receives the Bildungspreis of Zurich University of Teacher Education today, because she has given decisive impetus to international school development but also because she has set a personal example of what the power of her ideas can achieve in the world of practice. The Bildungspreis is awarded to Deborah Meier in recognition of a democrat who takes the ideals of the Constitution of the United States seriously. And the

⁵ <http://www.essentialschools.org/>

⁶ <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/BridgingDifferences/>

Prize honors the voice of practice. This voice is not loud, and it is also not dramatic; it is reliable and convincing.

Our Prize takes an artistic form: it is a relief designed by sculptor Hans Josephsohn, who has lived and worked in Zurich since 1938. The relief was cast in bronze at the Sitterwerk art foundry in St. Gallen. It is presented to each of our awardees. Its creator, Hans Josephsohn, is one of the most respected artists in Switzerland. Josephsohn's work is dedicated to the *conditio humana*, human existence, which he seeks to grasp in highest elementary simplicity. To human existence belongs education. It accompanies small people in the care of bigger people on their way in life. Josephsohn's relief permits us to get involved with the fundamental questions of education, and for this reason it is also a symbol for the Educational Prize. And one sees perhaps also how the world of the child guides the way to education.

Deborah Meier has received many awards for her work, including many honorary degrees from American universities. She was the recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 1987. We are proud that from today, our Educational Prize is one of her awards. With this Prize we honor an outstanding educator who has always seen that the current school system leaves many children behind (Meier & Wood, 2004), that we must distinguish between the language of policy and the practice of education, and that it is only the concrete project that achieves anything. And in this way, Deborah Meier, you are a shining example for educators all over the world.

But I won't close with that. Last week, in your *Education Week* blog, you described your impressions of a visit to Russia. In 1928 John Dewey hoped to see in the same place the beginning of a new society. In your blog you write that in 1936 your mother visited the Soviet Union and was aghast with what she saw, but that she enjoyed the singing of Russian children. You experienced that yourself when you were in Russia. Now, had I known this, I would, of course, have arranged for some Swiss children to sing you a song. But..., all I can do now is to present this Prize to you, extending with it our most heartfelt congratulations, and wait to read what your blog has to say about us.

References

- Bensman, D. (2000). *Central Park East and its graduates: Learning by heart*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Meier, D. W. (1968). Learning not to learn. *Dissent*, 15(6), 540-548.
- Meier, D. W. (1995). *The power of their ideas. Lessons for America from a small school in Harlem*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Meier, D. W. (2000). *Will standards save public education?* Boston: Beacon Press.
- Meier, D. W., Sizer, T., & Sizer, N. F. (2004). *Keeping school: Letters to families from principals of two small schools*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Meier, D. W., & Wood, G. H. (Eds.). (2004). *Many children left behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is damaging our children and our schools*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. A report to the nation and the Secretary of Education by The National Commission on Excellence in Education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Ravitch, D. (1995). *National standards in American education: A citizen's guide*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.