
TEACHING

IN

Themes

An Approach to Schoolwide Learning,
Creating Community,
and Differentiating Instruction

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Preface

I used to say, “It doesn’t matter what you study, just how you study it.” I still suspect that’s true. Still, isn’t there some subject matter that opens the door more widely to both the best of pedagogy and the best of knowledge about the world? Aren’t some things more important than others? Aren’t some topics easier to investigate in ways that are compatible with developing strong intellectual habits?

The accounts in this book were influenced by the 30-plus years of experience I brought into the proposal to start Mission Hill. I’m still not sure where I stand, although I’m sure of what I stand against! And an imposed state or federal curriculum is definitely on my hit list, even if it goes by the name of standards.

In fact, I liked the idea, as posed by Ted Sizer, of standards as a flag held high, not a script laid down. But the power of the standards he proposed was that they’d require the school itself to articulate and assess them—they had to be in the hands of those who implemented them and judged their efficacy. They require frequent revision as we learn from them. The flag we honored in 1776 (or whenever) did not stand for the same set of values and priorities that it did a hundred or two hundred years later. The kind of republic then envisioned had a narrow base—men with property. Today, sometimes begrudgingly, we accept a definition that includes men without property, women with and without, and people of all colors and races and languages. On the other hand, we’re more confused about when and how “foreigners” can become citizens than we were 250 years ago. Odd, isn’t it?

I started out in education visiting classrooms throughout Chicago’s mostly segregated South Side K–8 schools. I visited in the guise of a substitute teacher. While I had my credentials, I entered such assignments with astonished ignorance. I was more or less chased out of one school, having decided that, given my inability to control the class, they’d be safer without me. I had my good days. But my students for sure learned less than I did. This job was a part-time vocation, while my full-time one was divided between raising three children and working with the Congress of Racial Equality.

But the experience of applying to be a sub and the way I was treated in school and after school, by both the adults and the students, was

eye-opening. How 12 years of such a demeaning school culture might affect the kind of relationship an 18-year-old graduate had to society—the “public”—seemed far from imbued with hope. For me at the time, curriculum seemed for the moment less relevant than the culture of the school, the ways in which everyone—adults and children—was treated.

In an odd way, it was teaching kindergarten that got me interested in the “curriculum”—how the setting of the classroom and the interests of the children could be both a curriculum and a management tool. I rediscovered the obvious fact that interested human beings—of all ages—are the most efficiently productive learners, focused and perseverant when their curiosity is aroused. I found out, also, that traditional early childhood interests are hardly a mystery—they are the fundamental “stuff” of the world—sand, clay, paint, water, animals, plants, art, and each other. I saw that using these in early childhood education is all it takes, plus exploring the world outside the classroom with all its entrancing objects: elevators, escalators, tall buildings, bridges, trees, flowers, stores, cars, trains, subways, and on and on.

For the next nearly 10 years, I grew fascinated by the ordinary, both objects and words, and of course living things (how fascinating insects were for me and the children). These were the components of a curriculum, and this kind of curriculum had a name: *emergent*. The curriculum emerges from children’s interests—the questions they ask explicitly as well as those that we can observe in action. This process wasn’t dampened by having themes—a more focused core, which made it perhaps more manageable for a teacher and encouraged more cross-dialogue. Themes didn’t seem to dampen the spirit of discovery as long as we didn’t take it too seriously.

There were trade-offs. I turned Chicago’s kindergarten curriculum upside down; that year was supposed to be about “the ways in which Los Angeles and Tokyo are much alike,” and we spent time instead looking at how Chicago and Tokyo differed. It caused a small stir when an inspector actually appeared from the Chicago Public Schools central office to see if I was complying. My principal that year was a charming man of Japanese descent, and he was delighted at my sabotage, so I learned the teacher trick of apologizing and ignoring—for both good and bad, I suppose.

I liked the idea of whole-school themes because it created a lot for teachers to learn about together, as well as many examples of ways in which a topic could be studied. It made it easy to have older kids join younger ones, the older ones adding their sophistication in ways that were less intrusive than my own at times. In the school’s returning to the same subject every 4 years, such growing sophistication was honored, as was an understanding of how much more there always was to learn.

So it’s not necessary to note that the ideas behind E. D. Hirsch’s core curriculum as well as both the pedagogical and curricular “standards” of

the Common Core didn't fit our approach. Not only were they often in conflict with basic knowledge on child development and likely to damage deviant learners, but they threatened to lessen the focus on children as fascinating learners that made teaching fun and worthwhile. The whole concept was part and parcel of an effort to make nationwide testing easier, and thus make it easier to compare children with each other across classrooms, schools, cities, and states, and, ideally, compare learners in the United States with those of all our international competitors.

Fitting everything in from birth to age 18 was simple enough: Just design backward (an idea that has, alas, been interpreted in ways that assume we can know exactly how things will turn out); document carefully; and test often. The process rested on checklists of "to-dos" for teachers and watching alertly for where each child was falling behind. Over time it would increase the use of technology to gauge the pace of children's learning and would entail the removal of lively interactions between people and between people and the stuff of the world as each child entered his or her own learning box. Of course, the plan was unlikely to play out quite so smoothly, as both teachers and children were inescapably human, unique, peculiar, and ornery. But it was likely to damage precisely those aspects of our humanity that we almost universally agreed were so vital to the future of humankind—aspects such as empathy, curiosity, drive, self-regulation (a term I've recently discovered), perseverance, and the ability to discover novelty!

We shall overcome this too, and fortunately at Mission Hill, the "old-fashioned" way is still thriving as we sneak around all the latest bad ideas. It probably doesn't help our test scores K–8, but so far it hasn't hurt our graduates' ability to pass the Massachusetts-mandated graduation tests. We're keeping our fingers crossed and hoping the whole phenomenon will pass before we too get swept into a new dead end.

—Deborah W. Meier, Hillsdale, New York

Introduction

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Schools are institutions where hundreds, sometimes thousands, of children and adults come together for the purpose of educating students. But how often do these institutions feel like communities of learners? How can teachers and schools create meaningful communal and individual learning experiences when students come with widely differing skills, abilities, experiences, and sensitivities? How can teachers authentically assess the learning of their students and build on students' strengths and interests in ways that enrich the larger community? Given the history of classrooms as closed, and even secret, boxes that create an institution called school, how can schools be turned into places where all participants—teachers and students—are learning from each other? These are the big questions that guide much of the work of teachers at the Mission Hill School in Boston and that are addressed in depth in the chapters of this book.

The Mission Hill School is a small K–8 public pilot school in the Boston Public Schools system founded by Deborah Meier and colleagues in 1997. There are many unique features about the Mission Hill School that warrant the large amount of attention it has received in books, articles, and a popular new film series. It is small, culturally diverse, democratically governed, and dedicated to education for democratic citizenship. It uses portfolios of student work for assessment, and its graduates have been shown to achieve academic success in high school and college. The school saw its mission from the beginning as creating a setting—a whole schoolwide community, including parents and teachers alongside students, with all their differences and diversities (individual, social, class, and racial/ethnic)—as a strength and not a dilemma. Just as each teacher sought to create a classroom of strong, differentiated students, each functioning as an independent and confident learner, he or she also sought to create a community of learners, and so too did the school aim for such a goal schoolwide. The teachers at Mission Hill School have thought outside the box of traditional schooling to answer the questions

we posed above. The school has several unusual features that serve to aid in addressing these questions.

One unique feature of the school that has received little attention is the school's approach to curriculum, which involves 3-month whole-school thematic units. Each year, the entire school (with partial exception of the middle school) explores three broad thematic units together. One unit focuses on a particular aspect of U.S. history, another on an ancient civilization, and a third on a major area of science. These broad themes allow students to experience a sense of immersion in a world of inquiry, and allow teachers and students to design and plan together smaller emergent inquiries in their own classrooms within these themes. The teachers at the school are able to share information and resources, including guest speakers, musicians, artifacts, field trips, and books. The power of aesthetics plays a key role in this work. The faculty at the Mission Hill School realizes that the aesthetic value of student work can have a transformational effect on the identities of students. For this reason, many of the projects and activities completed by students within long-duration thematic units undergo multiple revisions, along with peer and adult critique within a noncompetitive and supportive environment. Projects are designed by teachers and students to be eventually presentable before audiences of peers, parents, and members of the community.

The detailed descriptions of the thematic units found in this book and the answers to the framing questions above are addressed not only to an audience of like-minded teachers who teach at small public progressive schools like the Mission Hill School. Rather, we know that teachers in all settings face these questions. Teachers never work with a truly homogeneous group of students who equally thrive on just one set of activities. Rather, teachers must continually differentiate their instruction, thinking about the needs of each individual child, if teachers are to support the learning and growth of the whole range of students. As Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) remind us, "Few teachers find their work effective or satisfying when they 'serve up' a curriculum—even an elegant one—to their students with no regard for their varied learning needs" (p. 1).

We argue that designing 3-month-long whole-school thematic units is a powerful approach to addressing the framing questions above. To avoid misunderstanding, we wish to clarify a few key terms that we use at the Mission Hill School and that are found in this book, starting with *differentiated instruction*. "Differentiated" can mean or suggest some catch phrase for continually updating what each student has completed or understands on a standardized curriculum or set of skills in chronological order. But for us, differentiating is led mostly by teachers following students' leads, observing closely, and bringing in the "just right" book, experiment, or material. And "instruction" often implies a teacher instructing—explicitly teaching. This may sometimes be useful and other times not. At Mission

Hill School, students' curiosity is highly valued and is seen as the driving force for much of the learning that takes place, so the instruction that happens is often in the form of the teacher as coach, providing materials and provocative questions and experiences for students while encouraging students to make key decisions about their own learning.

Thematic curriculum is interdisciplinary subject exploration whose components are bound together by a large overarching theme. At the Mission Hill School, there is generally a large theme that the whole school explores together, and individual teachers and classes may focus on smaller sub-themes within their classes based on considerations of age appropriateness as well as student and teacher interests. For example, the whole school might be exploring natural science, but individual teachers might focus more specifically on the human body or the life cycles of various animals, insects, or plant life. And even within these subthemes, individual students might be working on exploring a specific aspect of the human body or of the life cycle of a particular species.

Emergent curriculum refers to the individual interests of students within a classroom that the teacher encourages, allowing time for a student to explore a particular question or topic, providing resources that enrich the exploration. For instance, one year at Mission Hill School the yard behind the school became inundated with snails. They were everywhere! The students were fascinated by these creatures, generating hundreds of questions about them and collecting them to study more closely. Several teachers decided to use this opportunity to turn this accidental happening into a major exercise in an emergent curriculum. The students and staff began to conduct research into why these snails were there, the biology of snails, and more. Artwork was created, and ecosystems were designed to provide the snails with indoor habitats. The richness of the snail curriculum resided in the immediate accessibility of the subject matter for all students. It provided experiential and hands-on learning opportunities for all students, not differentially more for those who had different prior experiences with snails. Further, the topic of "snails" was one that could be investigated by children at different ability levels—from the most sophisticated scientist with deep background knowledge to the student who had never explored the complexity of snails from a scientific, artistic, or literary perspective. Teachers at Mission Hill School are forever seeking a balance between deductively choosing a broad topic to explore as a school or class that allows shared resources and adequate planning time for teachers and the more inductive or emergent approach, which builds on the immediate interests and curiosities of students and generally provides the most powerful motivation for students to seriously explore and play with new ideas.

Integrated curriculum is an approach to teaching that weaves disciplinary knowledge from various subjects together to allow students to be at the center of the decisionmaking process. This approach is characterized

by lengthy, uninterrupted periods of time during which students are working on various long-term projects. Students are generally allowed to move around the classroom and school, acquiring materials, solving problems, and reading and writing, and the whole class will come together for limited amounts of time to plan work periods, share explorations, and teach or hear mini-lessons.

We are not arguing that the thematic approach described in this book represents a utopian vision. Clearly, trade-offs have to be made. By valuing thematic, emergent, and integrated curricula we are taking a depth-over-breadth approach, one that necessarily means that some curricular topics—including topics that individuals may argue are critically important—remain largely unstudied by graduates of the Mission Hill School. By rotating planned curricular themes, we attempt to ensure balance and exposure to a range of important disciplinary topics (see Appendix A for a list of themes). Through the repetition of themes every 4 years, students also have an opportunity to return to an old theme with gained knowledge about the subject and greater sophistication. We believe that the trade-offs are worth it. The deep-immersion approach challenges students to think critically and more like scientists when studying science, for example, as they see much more of why a particular topic fascinates scientists and as they note the space between problems and mysteries—those areas where professionals work to solve real problems of inquiry. The thematic units also encourage collaboration for both students and teachers. Teachers across the grades can do planning together, arrange joint class trips, gather and share rich resources, and give their students opportunities to display work and present performances to one another. Thematic units allow time for students to play with materials and create impressive and artistic projects or solve complex problems, with help from other older or younger students. Once again, this approach creates a sense of school-wide community, classroom pride, and opportunities for each individual or small group to “show off” to an appreciative audience.

We also do not want to give the false impression that these approaches were invented by teachers at the Mission Hill School. In Chapter 2, the founding principal of the school, Deborah Meier, describes the deeper history of some of these ideas from her previous work in New York City with the Central Park East schools, Lillian Weber, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and others. Meier also argues that the purpose of public education must be to provide students with the skills of democracy: the ability to deliberate, to listen to others’ opinions, to search for new answers, to defend one’s position with evidence, and to imagine a different future. Meier reminds us that “schooling for ruling” was once reserved for the dominant class in society, and now our hope must be for all students to learn to be effective and powerful citizens in a democracy. The Mission Hill School thus decided to create a more democratic, tracking-and-ranking-free