

A Critical Essay on Deborah Meier's Video

Lucinda Wolters

As a doctoral student reflecting on her philosophy of education, I strive to refine and improve my thinking to evolve as a better educator. In doing so, I recognize that a reasoned doctrine is dynamic, possessing a living quality, that is not separate from my background knowledge, experiences, and changing contexts in which I teach and lead. I steadily participate as a thinker, who is also a learner, interconnected with others and our shared contexts. I actively mull over, in an on-going manner, specific school and societal conditions, and voices of philosophers and experts, with the intention to reach well-supported conclusions. With increasing consciousness, it is my hope that my evolving personal philosophy will enlighten my views on the purposes of education and, thus, my day-to-day responses and decisions.

Currently I ponder a characteristic of schools that requires personal exploration, that is, the role of the teacher and how one should function authoritatively in educational situations. I consider these questions: what is the nature of power? What is the role of power in a classroom and school? What are the sources of power? What relevance does power have in light of the purposes of education? From this inquiring stance, I was introduced to Deborah Meier, who is the founder of Central Park East High School in New York City. In a twenty-five minute video (Meier, 2015), she shares her views about how schools should function. The following essay will briefly evaluate her ideas from the perspective of educational philosophers, such as Dewey, Guttman, and Arendt, to explore how they might respond, to better inform my own philosophy and choice points, regarding the role of authority in our schools.

With over fifty years in education, Meier brings a knowledgeable, insightful perspective. She possesses clear convictions regarding the purposes of education and has advocated for reform and revitalization of schools in the New York City and Boston areas. In fact, an important

success for her was founding several choice schools that underscored communities in which teachers had greater autonomy than public schools, and parents could be involved and share their desires for their children's education. As a teacher, administrator, and author of several books on education, Meier believes schools must prioritize, "teaching kids something about how to get their voice heard and how to be part of the conversation and decision making" (2015, 1:58). She further articulates, "the public square concept as a perfect description to create schools for the whole community" (5:04) where curriculum belongs to everyone. Essentially, Meier promotes schools as places to teach democracy; parents, teachers, and students are engaged members to make this a meaningful reality.

Dewey (1859-1952), who was an educational philosopher and social reformer, would have concurred with Meier. Based on his foundational ideas, he was a strong advocate for democracy in schools, which is one of the wheels of his educational 'vehicle.' More precisely, with connecting axles, the additional conceptual wheels of freedom, experience and growth, along with democracy, he believed, simultaneously allow for a progressive education. Yet, when examining more closely what Dewey (1907) meant by democracy in schools, he envisioned, "an embryonic community life...active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society." It was through this school experience that Dewey believed society would develop into something "worthy, lovely, and harmonious" (p. 44). In support, Meier (2015) perceived democratic schools providing the opportunity for "all the important kinds of issues that arise in national politics to get played out" (20:48). She shares further that students can then experience "the kind of conflict that is healthy and even joyous in a strong democratic culture" (21:28). Both Dewey and Meier have a purposeful, yet, somewhat glorified, outlook regarding democracy in schools; certainly compelling for today's young to come to understand the authority of their voices in decision-making processes.

When criticizing typical schools, Meier (2015) opens her talk by stating, “If we had invented an institution for the purpose of teaching democracy it would not look like any of the schools that you and I know well” (0:22). She holds that schools are “more inclined to teach us the opposite lessons” (0:43) and refers to teachers in these contexts to act as “prison guards” (3:24). Meier also highlights problematic comments adults might make to children, “It doesn’t matter if you agree or disagree. We don’t make the rules” (11:50), that interfere with teaching democracy when “disobedience is at the heart” (2:34) of the system. She wants children “to see how power works,” pinpointing how authority models are tied to education’s purpose for responsible citizenry. Again, Dewey, (2008) as a former intellectual companion in this approach, acknowledged that, “in many cases—too many cases—the activity of the immature human being is simply played upon to secure habits which are useful. He is trained like an animal rather than educated like a human being” (p. 17). Power in these models seals lips, seals opinions, while thinking muscles atrophy.

In present-day agreement, Amy Guttmann, the current, eighth president of the University of Pennsylvania, firmly argues for a democratic education, along with the labelling of society as complex and pluralistic. She expresses the “profound problem” in a democratic education system to be “how to reconcile individual freedom and civic virtue,” since tension exist between these two values and one cannot be over-prioritized (Curran, 2017, p. 159-160). Doing so topples the power horse cart to a debilitating societal result, if the individual or collective directs priorities at the cost of the other. She seeks to resolve this polarity by describing a democratic approach that pushes for education to “prepare citizens for consciously reproducing (not replicating) society.” To that end, she sees the stress placed on being “non-repressive...to cultivate the kind of character...that enables people to choose rationally.” Guttmann, then, asserts that education is the essential opportunity to teach “veracity, nonviolence, toleration and mutual respect – that serve as

foundations for rational deliberation of different ways of life” (p. 161). The ability to think critically, while remaining open to diversity, becomes a thoroughfare to developing the personal authority necessary for citizenship in society.

In contrast, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), a German-American philosopher and political theorist, shared alternative views when weighing in on education and the democratic path. Succinctly put, Arendt advocated for a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood, and saw that a child’s education should be “debarred from the world of grown-ups and artificially kept in his own.” Furthermore, teachers, in her view, are the authority, “as representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility,” where children are to “be gradually introduced” into adulthood. It appears that her emphasis on separateness between the roles of a child and a teacher parallels the typical school Meier describes, ones in which rule following and obedience preside, where children abdicate their contributing expressions. In company alongside, Dewey (1938) would argue that this distinction is “a treacherous idea,” since acquiring knowledge and skills doesn’t mean an automatic “preparation for their right and effective use under conditions very unlike those in which they were acquired” (p. 47). How education is structured and shared in, as teachers facilitating and students participating, is essential for developing applicable authority and power for our youngs’ futures.

Now, having internalized some of Dewey’s and Meier’s perspectives, without muttering, I will endeavor to engage in a "continual reorganization, reconstruction and transformation of experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 50), that coincides with an ever-emerging philosophy of education. It is from this authentic posture, I acknowledge the authority of my influential voice, while guiding, in turn, the authority of children’s developing voices.

References

- Curren, R. (2017). *Philosophy of education: An anthology*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Dewey, J. (1907). *School and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. Dover Publications, Inc.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Simon and Schuster.
- Dewey, J. (2008). *Democracy and education*. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *The middle works 1899-1924, 9:1916*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Meier, D. (2015). *Deborah Meier on democratic schooling*. Albert Shanker Institute.