

A hundred times more rewarding

When I was in fifth grade, my family moved from New York to Florida for a year. There, I attended a traditional neighborhood school. Before we moved, my mother researched the local schools, and my school was considered one of the best in the area.

I don't remember much of what I learned that year, but a couple things do stick in my mind. One day, our homework assignment was to answer the questions at the back of a chapter in one of our textbooks. The last question was a "What do you think?" type of question. When I got my homework back, my teacher told me that my answer was wrong. I never got over how she could say my opinion was wrong. The message was clearly that my opinion didn't matter.

I moved back to New York for sixth grade and went back to Central Park East (CPE). It was like a breath of fresh air. I wasn't just a student; I was also a teacher and an equal. My opinions and ideas were respected. I had always been treated this way at CPE, but at my Florida school, I kind of forgot that this was the way I should be treated as a student.

My teachers in Florida wanted kids to do what they were told: Read the book, answer the questions, take a test. When we studied the Revolutionary War, we had to memorize the information in our textbook, including a poem about Paul Revere. It was very important to know the poem exactly, but it had no meaning to me. If you had asked me to recite the poem a week later, I wouldn't have been able to. What purpose did this poem have? Why was it so important for me to memorize? After learning this poem, our lesson on Paul Revere was over and we moved on to another topic.

At CPE, memorizing wasn't good enough. We were expected to study a topic until we really understood it, then come up with some kind of creative way of presenting what we learned. When we studied the Civil War at Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), our group had to become experts and teach what we discovered to the rest of the class.

We had to do a lot of research, reading letters from the time and books written by people with different points of view. Then we had to make a presentation and explain and defend our ideas. My friends and I created The Civil War News a simulated broadcast on the important battles, turning points, and significance of the war. At the end we had a news flash announcing the end of the war. I remember a lot more of what I learned about the Civil War that year than what I learned in Florida about the Revolutionary War.

An important part of the approach at CPESS is that teachers allowed us to influence what we were learning and how we learned it. When we were studying the history of the 1920s and '30s, for example, we found that our textbooks lacked information from varied points of view and dealt with the history of people of color in a superficial manner. So this inspired us to create our own textbook about the '20s and '30s.

We chose our topics, assigned our own homework, and scheduled our class time to discuss and organize the textbook. By the end of the class, our book had sections about topics ranging from the Apollo Theater to the women's-suffrage movement. Everyone in the class worked harder because it became our work, and instead of our teacher feeling like he had lost control, he encouraged us 100 percent.

My friends thought that CPESS sounded cool, that we had a lot of freedom and could talk with our teachers. They thought our work sounded easier because everything didn't lead up to a test, and they thought taking a test was a lot harder than what we were doing. But I think memorizing a bunch of facts and answering multiple-choice questions on a test is easier, because it's not really learning. You don't have to think as much as we did at CPESS.

During my last two years at CPESS, which are called the Senior Institute, I had to complete separate portfolios to show what I had learned in fourteen areas, including literature, science and technology, history and social studies, and practical skills. Each one was a major project, and eight of them had to be presented and defended to a four-person committee made up of two teachers, a student, and a person of my choice.

For my math portfolio, I combined math with social issues and designed a women's health center for East Harlem. I had to justify why I chose this community, and show that it did not have enough services for women. I had to draw the center to scale, both floor plans and elevations, and solve problems such as how to support the weight of water in a pool on the second floor. I had to apply the formulas I had learned in other math and geometry classes.

In a traditional math class, I would have just memorized the formulas and repeated them on a test. It feels good to get a high grade on a test, but when you do a portfolio -- presenting your ideas and then defending them -- it's a hundred times more rewarding. And it's interesting and even fun.

It's easy for me to write about the experiences I had at CPE and CPESS because the teachers went out of their way to make sure I understood what I was doing and had a good time doing it. I remember always being asked if I liked school and, to most people's surprise, I would tell them that I loved school and that it was like a second home to me. My days in CPE and CPESS will never be forgotten; they prepared me to keep learning for the rest of my life

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