
Film Review

Good Morning Mission Hill: The Freedom to Teach & the Freedom to Learn (2014)

Produced and Directed by Tom and Amy Valens
<http://goodmorningmissionhill.com/>

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"The whole point of education is to help you exercise your judgement and you can't do that if the expert adults in your school can't exercise theirs."

Deborah Meier, Founder Mission Hill School



Tom and Amy Valens, film maker and retired educator, once again transport viewers on a wonderful one-hour journey through a school year at the Mission Hill kindergarten-through-8th-grade pilot school in the North End of Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A. The school, founded in 1997, currently serves 250 diverse learners from the local neighborhood in 10 multi-graded classrooms. Mission Hill follows a number of principles, or habits of mind, which are contextualized and adjusted on a daily basis. The pilot school grounded on the belief system of the learning community, one of 70 in the nation, is focused on empowering students, teachers, parents, staff, and the community to make essential decisions about education. Those decisions are modeled and reinforced by teachers, staff, and K-8 students who eventually internalize and own those essential guiding principles. The film uses a series of carefully edited overlapping vignettes selected from 150 hours of videotaping in 2011-12 to explain, demonstrate, and affirm essential pedagogic principles through a comprehensive overview of school activities.

A caring, loving, giving, sharing, and reflective atmosphere permeates Mission Hill School, reminiscent of the best of British Open Classroom theories and practices. It is a place where the pedagogic practices of Pestalozzi and Froebel nurture the heart, head, and hand of each student by teaching the whole child. What often appears on the surface to be a free flowing and at times splash of activities is drawn from a deep pool of



reflective learning. Rest assured the semi-chaotic scenes are not the breakdown of social order but a safe place to experiment with constructing a teaching and learning environment that has a place for everyone concerned. When developmental and personal issues are raised, they are discussed and resolved even if it takes months of negotiations.

The diverse school population of 250 (41% Hispanic, 23 % Black, 29% White and 7% other) is large enough to form a community but small enough so that each staff member knows every student by name and grade. Teachers pride themselves in remembering every student's learning profile and personal preferences. Mission Hill is a learning community that values engagement and empowerment. Ms. Alya Gavins, the principal, explains that the objectives of Mission Hill are to establish and nurture habits of the mind in an environment of trust, care and love.

The video takes us through a school year, which begins with staff meetings to select general themes such as natural sciences and international culture. In 2011-12, the honey bee was selected, as was the history and culture of Ancient China. Students learned everything about honeybees. They observed an active honeycomb from a student-constructed viewing stand in the classroom. They published a newsletter about honeybees and used mixed media to construct and



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display honeybees in a Bee Fair. Students had an opportunity to see honey bees in their natural environment. The lower grades spend a full day at the Farm School in Athol, MA (<http://farmschool.org/>). The upper grades spend 2 ½ days at the school learning how to care for domesticated animals and becoming familiar with the 24/7 life of a farmer and the requisite manual skills to maintain a farm. These rural experiences are just part of grounding and contextualizing the K-8 curriculum in career experiences.

In their Boston neighborhood, teachers take students on guided tours of local businesses, and they interact with owners, skilled artisans and artists. The 1st and 2nd grades wanted to investigate the requisite skills of a baker. They visited a bakery and then baked and sold their cookies, cupcakes, and cakes to teachers, staff and parents.



The 6th through 8th grade students conducted a careers project by interviewing 45 representatives from various careers and then writing and illustrating a book based on their responses. Approximately 1,000 copies of their edited book, entitled *A Place for Me in the World: People Talk About the Work They Love*, was published by 826 Boston and was illustrated with linocut portraits of each person interviewed. The final project for graduating 8th grade students is portfolio-based assessment. Each student selects one area from Science, History, Mathematics, Writing, or Literature Beyond the Classroom and has to explain and defend their research-based premise for 2 ½ hours in front of a panel of teachers and community representatives.



Play is integrated with content and is best described as serious play. It occurs

within social settings to help facilitate discussion and interaction with peers and older students. The play objects require assembly and teamwork. Reading groups are formed by students who read to each other, critiquing story plots and characters. They author, illustrate, and bind small pamphlets about their favorite activities.

At times during the day there is tension, conflict, and hurtful actions and words. Those painful experiences may be soothed by a hug, comforting gesture, or sincere apologies. Students help in the healing process, and it is not unusual to see them sorting out disputes and caring for each other in open displays of affection.



Mutual respect for differences crosses all lines in this inclusive school. There is every form and type of diversity one could imagine in an urban setting. Those differences are celebrated and embraced as various cultures, traditions, dress, language, and holidays form the core of a school community where everyone has an important contribution to make and a role to play. Ancient China was one of the year's study themes: Students made and painted their own Chinese opera face masks from plaster castings, and the school sponsored a Chinese Lunar New Year's festival.



One area of concern is the Massachusetts-mandated assessments in Language Arts and Mathematics. The students at Mission Hill do not perform well on standardized assessments. That is evident throughout the video; one rarely sees a teacher teaching to or administering a test. The school's operational philosophy emphasizes drawing out and sharing inner knowledge, as Socrates recommended, rather than pouring in content as Herbart prescribed. Facing the demands of rigorous student assessments (PARCC) based on the Common Core State Standards, Mission Hill is a caring island in the midst of a tumultuous sea of standardized testing. The school is a pilot project and very

successful as a humanistic model of integrated teaching and learning for the whole child.

After watching this enthralling video, one can view 10 video chapters chronicling a year at Mission Hill School: <http://www.missionhillschool.org/a-year-at-mission-hill/>

- Chapter One: *Why We're Here*
- Chapter Two: *Beginning the Year*
- Chapter Three: *Making it Real*
- Chapter Four: *Love and Limits*
- Chapter Five: *The Eye of the Dragon*
- Chapter Six: *Like a Family*
- Chapter Seven: *Behind the Scenes*
- Chapter Eight: *The World of Work*
- Chapter Nine: *Seeing the Learning*
- Chapter Ten: *The Freedom to Teach*

The Valens produced and directed a reflective video that earns a 9.5 on a scale of 10 for meeting or exceeding multicultural educational standards in terms of expressing social conditions; engaging dialogue; promoting self-reflection and transformational education; using refined cinematography, pacing, sound, background music, and site selection; and careful editing.

Educational Resources

The Farm School in Athol, MA
<http://farmschool.org/>

National Charter School Resource Center
<http://www.charterschoolcenter.org/>

Mission Hill K-8 Pilot Public School, Boston, MA
<http://www.missionhillschool.org/>

Mission Hill K-8 Public School
<https://www.facebook.com/MissionHillSchool>

Roxbury Students Write Magnificent Book, by Lawrence Harmon, 12 June 2012, Boston Globe
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2012/06/15/roxbury-middle-school-students-write-place-for-world/WfgYgjIEsBuakWNHWLhS6L/story.html>

The Boston Pilot, Horace Mann, and Innovation Schools Network
<http://www.ccebos.org/pilotschools/schools.html>

Why this Film?
<http://goodmorningmissionhill.com/about-the-film/why-this-film/>

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