



When Community and Justice Connect: Progressive Curricula of Social Justice, Identity, and Children’s Worlds at Manhattan Country School

Presenters:

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A Brief History...

Manhattan Country School was founded in 1966 by Gus and Marty Trowbridge as a “private school with a public mission.” We are a co-educational, pre-K to 8th grade school with about 200 students. Our city campus is located on East 96th Street near Central Park and our Farm is located in Roxbury, NY.

Vision

Manhattan Country School envisions its students as future leaders whose shared experiences in learning and activism inspire them to champion excellence and justice, compassion and peace, and the rights of all people to racial, economic, environmental, and educational equity.

Mission

Reflecting the vision of the civil rights movement, Manhattan Country School teaches students in a community with no racial majority and broad economic diversity. Our goals for students are academic excellence, intellectual freedom, social awareness, self-confidence, and first-hand knowledge of the natural world. MCS is unique among NYC independent schools in having a 180-acre working farm integral to the curriculum and a sliding scale for tuition.

MCS Curriculum

With a school history rooted in diversity, activism, social justice, progressivism, farm education, sustainability, and community, MCS teachers seek to combine a variety of philosophies and values in their classrooms. We have identified four major strands that define curriculum at Manhattan Country School.

Balancing Structure and Skills with Freedom and Expression

The pedagogical approach at MCS considers the growth of the whole child and welcomes children’s voices and questions as a guide for their own learning. At the same time, we teach important basic skills to ensure every child has access to academic success. We teach a diverse community and strive for excellence for everyone. The goals of our academic program are to blend exploration with equity, to build students’ cultural capital, and to ensure students have the tools to be sharp critical thinkers, creative problem solvers, and articulate democratic citizens.

Multicultural Curriculum and Identity

MCS' curriculum originates from and reflects the children in the classrooms, in a school with no racial majority and wide socio-economic diversity. Our multicultural curriculum is intentional in decoding identity and in exploring gender, race, culture, self, and "other" through child-centered activities. 4-5s' home visits expose students to an array of homes, families, neighborhoods, and cultures. The 9-10s' immigration study includes tours of modern immigrant enclaves and interviews with immigrants in the community. Seventh grade autobiographies give each student the opportunity to tell their growing up stories and share how they see themselves. MCS classrooms invite every child to share their story, to learn their history, and to take action against injustices, thus building a strong sense of identity, as well as community, for each graduate.

Farm, Community, and Environmental Justice

The farm program has been a part of our school since its inception. MCS Farm has three major goals: to offer environmental education and exposure to rural living, to teach students the value of work and interdependence, and to create an equalizing experience where a diverse group of children can come together as a community. The Farm faculty teaches classes on nature, farming, textiles, cooking, history, and folklore. There are many connections between time spent at the Farm and curriculum in NYC. More recently, we have expanded our focus on environmental justice, tying the values of sustainability inherent in the farm program to our long-held commitment to equality and activism.

Social Justice and Activism

MCS teaches students to not only know about the world but to play an active role in making it better. We want our students to be agents of change, who bring passion, perspective, and intellect to solve the world's problems. The most visible activism projects are led by our oldest students: the annual 8th grade MLK Walk, which is organized and directed by students, and the annual Activism Project, which has included a trip to post-Katrina Mississippi, a speak-out against violence in Central Park, and a walkathon to raise money for solar panels at the Farm. The seeds of activism, however, are planted in our youngest classrooms and nurtured throughout the school.

What Do You Stand For as a Progressive Educator?

Progressive education is defined in many ways, yet there are common values we all share. We will conclude our workshop with a discussion of our vision for progressive education, both to enhance and enrich our individual teaching and to build a shared understanding to help strengthen our voice as progressive educators in the wider educational and political landscape.

- What do you stand for as a Progressive Educator? What strands seem most compelling and salient at your school?
- What are the challenges and obstacles you face in doing this work? How have you overcome them? What's something you wish you as an educator or you as a school were doing?
- What have been your biggest triumphs in doing this work?
- Are there new ideas you would like to incorporate into your curriculum or pedagogy? How are you planning to grow and evolve?