

Schools Matter

"A child's learning is the function more of the characteristics of his classmates than those of the teacher." James Coleman, 1972

Wednesday, January 15, 2014

Full Interview with Former Charter Teacher at Brooklyn Ascend, Part I

In the following interview, a teacher shares her story about working at Brooklyn Ascend, one of the total compliance, "no excuses" charter schools in Brooklyn. Emily Talmage (formerly Emily Kennedy), who now happily teaches third grade in a Lewiston, Maine public school, has given permission to post her entire interview, which was originally conducted with an assurance of her anonymity. Some of her emails regarding her experience at Brooklyn Ascend have been previously posted [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

This is the first of three posts based on Emily's interview. I will save my comments for later. Emily's eloquence requires no embellishment.

You may want to keep a tally of ethical breaches and statute violations by Brooklyn Ascend as you read. I have heard of all of these and more in interviews with former KIPP teachers, which I will share in a book to be published by Rowman & Littlefield in February 2016. [Pre-publication orders may be placed here.](#)

INT: Tell me a little bit about your own education, and how you came to be a teacher.

R: I grew up in Brunswick, Maine. I went to public elementary and middle school, and then public high school for my senior year. I actually went to boarding school for three years of high school. I was at Exeter in New Hampshire. I spent four years at Amherst College, and I was an art major. I was a New York City teaching fellow, so I actually had no real education background. I moved to New York and started teaching at a public school for kids with severe special needs. I taught a class of kids who had emotional disturbances. It was third through fifth. I did that for three years. I carried through. I had a group that I started with in the third grade, and went through with them to fifth. After that, I thought, "I ought to try working at a charter school." That was how I ended up at Brooklyn Ascend, and how I ended up getting in contact with you. That's the short version.

INT: The first school you taught at that you worked with these children from third through fifth grade?

R: Yeah.

INT: Was that a regular public school?

R: It was a regular public school. It was part of what's called District 75, which is the district that they have in New York City for kids with special needs, with autism, or mental [challenges], or emotional disturbances. Yes, it was a regular public school. It was PS 352 up in the Tremont neighborhood of the Bronx.

INT: How did you find about the opening at Brooklyn Ascend?

R: I found it on idealist.org. They had a posting saying that they were looking for a special educator. It didn't end up being a special education position. That was what they were

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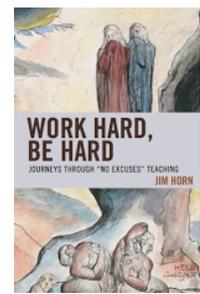
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There was an error in this

advertising for, that they needed a pull out teacher to work with small groups of kids. It was third grade. It sounded like something I would be qualified for.

INT: You went for an interview.

R: I did. They hired me almost right away. I was also looking at a couple other charter schools, at Harlem Success who had actually also offered me a position. It would be teaching second grade coaching teaching. When I told them that I had been offered a position at Harlem Success, they immediately offered me a position, and offered me a salary that was a little bit more than I was getting at the public school. I was getting fifty four thousand that year at the public school, my last year at public school. They offered me sixty thousand five hundred, which to me sounded like a lot. As soon as I saw that number, I thought, "All right. I'll give this a shot."

INT: When you went looking for an opportunity to teach in a charter school, can you talk about that a little bit? Why a charter school?

R: At the time I didn't know a whole lot about them. I actually hadn't seen it yet. I had seen the advertisement for *Waiting for Superman*. I had this idea in my head that charter schools were, and I think I even said at the time that they were, "getting the job done." I didn't really know what I meant by that. What I was looking for was just a different type of experience after working at the public school that I had been at for three years. I had heard that you can get paid more at a charter school. I had heard that they treat teachers more like professionals at charter schools. I don't even know what else I heard.

I went on the web sites, and I had found a couple of schools that had really nice looking websites. Harlem Success had one. There was this school called Harlem Village Academy in Harlem that had one also. I had heard that charter schools are closing the achievement gap. There are these certain schools that are really making it work. I didn't really do my homework before I got into it. A lot of what ended up happening, ended up really surprising and disappointing me.

INT: Let's talk a little bit about that. I guess I could phrase it this way. How was the experience of working in a school different from your expectations?

R: I had thought that I would be treated like a professional, and that teaching would somehow be seen as a respected job. I don't really know what I expected, looking back. I know that when I got there, they immediately changed what I had applied to do. I had applied to be, and they had hired me as a third grade pull out teacher.

A couple of months into the year, they gave the students a mock ELA test and a mock math test. They panicked, and realized that the kids weren't really doing very well, or that they weren't on track, just pulling threes and fours at the end of the year. They decided to completely rearrange the third grade.

INT: What kind of tests did they give them?

R: They gave them a mock ELA. You know New York State has a state exam each year, and they gave them a mock test. I think it was one from one of the previous years. These are done about once a month, all through the school year, gave them a mock test to see what their progress was. They completely changed it, and then they decided to restructure the third grade.

They had us come in over Christmas break, and told us that I was no longer going to be the pull out teacher. They were going to put all of the lowest performing kids into one class, and have it so there was the low, medium and high class. Now all of a sudden, I had a class of thirty scholars, we had to call them. I was only allowed to teach reading and math. I really wasn't even allowed to plan my own lessons.

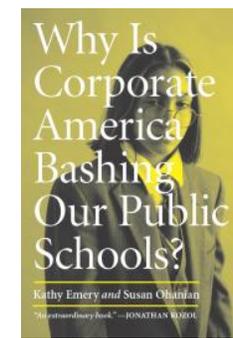
That was a big difference than what I had expected versus what actually happened. I had it in my head that I would be working in this place where teaching is really respected. Then I ended up

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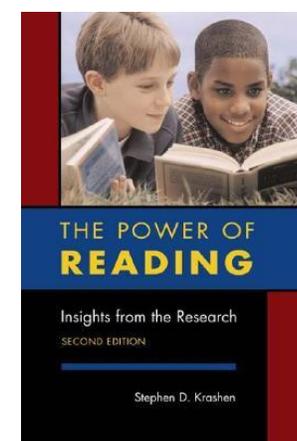
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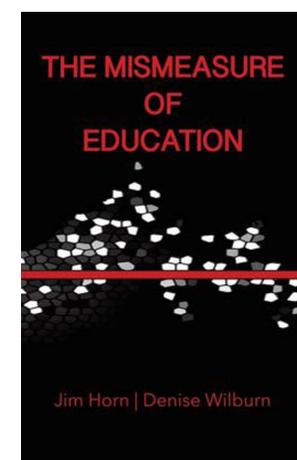
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by Doug Martin



having to spoon feed to the kids. They were handing everything to me, saying, "You have to teach this lesson, and this lesson." I felt more like a robot for a while, to be honest. It was pretty miserable.

INT: What were these lessons like? Were they scripted lessons? Did you have a script?

R: What they did is we had at Brooklyn Ascend a data analyst. She's a former Teach for America person. I think she was a PhD in Data Instruction, or something like that. Basically, she took the mock ELA and the mock math data and analyzed it, and came up with these certain concepts that the kids weren't doing well on. Some certain percentage hadn't done well on the main idea questions. Some certain percentage hadn't done well on making inferences in narrative procedure type passages. Just pulled right from the test. I'm trying to get this all right. Our data analyst basically pulled out these skills from looking at the mock data. I remember another thing that really surprised me which was that I didn't have any authority to actually assess the kids myself. Which for me was really disappointing because I had come from working with a really small group, and that was a big part of what I enjoyed about teaching. Really getting to know the kids, and figuring out on a really deep level what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, why they're struggling in some parts of reading and not others. That was something I loved about teaching.

All of a sudden, I had no power to do that at all. We had to use documents placed in front of us that said, "This percentage needs to work on this." Our school Director, who incidentally a Teach for America graduate, decided to take one of the second grade teachers and put her in charge of the third grade. We now had this supervisor, and it was her job to come up with these scripted lessons that we would then have to present to the kids.

INT: You had a script. You had something to say, and the children had something that they were supposed to say back to you?

R: Some of it was. The lessons were scripted in that it was all written, like say such and such to the kids. We had to do this thing where we had to snap our fingers and then the kids would repeat it back. To me it was just complete and utter nonsense. The kids aren't learning a thing this way. It blew me away. For some reason, nobody said anything about it, either. Everybody was just going along with this way of teaching. I don't know--It felt like we were training dogs, with all the snapping.

INT: Was their chanting also?

R: We had to do the chanting, oh yeah. Every morning we had to start out. The way it worked is the kids would come in at seven-thirty. They came in silently. They had to walk in single file. The first thing that would happen would they would stop in front of the doors to the cafeteria. There would be a teacher sitting there who would pull up their shirt, and make sure they had a belt on. Pull up their pants, pull up the bottoms and make sure they had on the right color shoes, and the right color socks. If the top three buttons weren't buttoned, she'd button up the top button.

The kids would come in and they had to have breakfast completely silently, which I think is what they do at KIPP. I'm not positive. A completely silent breakfast, which was also fairly disappointing to me because at my old school, breakfast was a time when I'd chat with the kids about their weekend. Get a sense of where they were at in their lives. What was going on with them. Are they having good days? Are they having bad days? Did they get their homework done? Do they need any help with it? This was a time to chat with the kids. It was also a time I really liked. Now I had to be completely, completely silent.

As teachers, we were required to carry these clipboards that had a list of each child's name. Any time we had to give a kid a "correction," we had to mark it on the chart. If a kid whispered to another one during breakfast, we had to write down "talking." We had what I think at some schools they call it "Slant," but at Brooklyn Ascend we called it STAR. They had to sit up tall,



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track the speaker, attention forward, respect always. That's what it stands for. At breakfast, everybody'd come in silently, eat their breakfast silently. They had a choice to either take out a book, or they had to sit with their hands folded in front of them. I wasn't even allowed to talk to them. Sometimes I'd secretly try to walk beside them and whisper, "Did you have a good weekend? Is everything okay?"

Their eight year olds, and they need somebody to check in with. At least that's the way I feel. I had one little girl who I had moved into a shelter, but we had to whisper about it at breakfast. She had to whisper and tell me, "Things are okay." (Deep sigh.) It was awful. A silent breakfast. Silent breakfast would stop when one of the head teachers -- our third grade supervisor would stop and say, every morning was the same thing, it was "Good morning, scholars." They'd say, "Good morning, Miss Bacon." Then we'd say, "How do you feel today?" Then they would say, "Hungry for knowledge to get us to college."

Then we'd do some other type of cheer, "Pick up your pencils, and you will be rewarded" was another one. These all come right out of, I don't think they come from KIPP but I know that they use them at the Uncommon Schools, and a lot of the other charter schools in the area. Every morning, right before you went upstairs, we had to say this one cheer, "What's out destination (clap clap)? Higher education." Have you heard that one before?

INT: Mm hmm.

R: We'd do that, and then the drums would start, and they'd have to march out silently. Again, completely silent though the kids have been at school for thirty to forty minutes and have had a chance --

They--we'd walk out of the cafeteria around eight or eight ten. Even after a weeklong vacation, they still haven't even had the chance to say good morning to each other. They still haven't even had a chance to say good morning to the teacher. It was crazy. We'd go up to the classroom. They'd go to their seats. Their job was to silently take out a book. They'd sit for another half an hour, doing completely silent reading. This was for most of the year, except for starting December. They'd come up, they'd unpack. We'd have small groups where we had this scripted reading comprehensive test prep thing that we had to do. Which was basically completely mimicking what happens on the state ELA test. There was a reading passage, and they'd have to read it and figure out what answers to pick, and bubble it. Sometimes we got to talk if we were doing that. At eight thirty, it would be the first period of the day. We'd start a lesson. Even the lessons, there still wasn't an opportunity to talk. Again, you asked what my expectations were versus what actually happened. I thought that a school that really prides itself in giving the kids what they need, and bringing them to where they need to go, you would assume that it's going to foster some kind of community, and that the kids are going to get to know their teacher. Something, but there was nothing.

You had to go right from silent breakfast to silent reading, to the first lesson. Every single lesson had to be in the format of what's called I Do /We Do /You Do. You've heard of that probably?

INT: No, I haven't heard of that.

R: I Do /We Do /You Do is one of Doug Lemov's techniques. Everything the lesson did had to be, first the teacher explicitly models how to do it on the board. Let's say we're learning, if it were math, how to write a fraction. You would say, "First, I'm going to show you how to do it." Literally, we would have to say, "First, I'm going to show you. Watch what I do. I'm going to write the number 1, and then I'm going to draw a line, and write the number two."

That was the I Do. Then We Do would be, "Now, can somebody help me do the next one?" We'd do it together. Then You Do would be we'd pass out worksheets, and the kids would do it on the worksheets. It was always, always worksheets. We did stacks, and stacks and stacks of worksheets. You wouldn't believe how many worksheets these kids had to do. It was crazy. It all had to be in that format. I Do. We Do. You do. Then You Do would be independent worksheet

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time. There was no pair work. Nothing.

INT: No group work, no cooperative group work?

R: Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Also, sometimes I would get in trouble because we got observed constantly. The impression I got was that they thought the reason the third graders hadn't done well on that original mock exam was because the third grade instruction was off. I was new to a charter school. In fact, actually all four of us were new to charter school that year. We were constantly being observed. We had to come in over Christmas break, and do this whole training, and it was all based on *Teach like a Champion*, which is the Doug Lemov technique. We were always being observed.

Our supervisor would come in and videotape, or check off that we were doing this, that and the other thing. I used to present a question for the kids to ponder. I like to start lessons like that from time to time. Not all the time, but some times. Let's look at this problem on the board. Let's brainstorm some ways about how we might solve this. We were not allowed to do that. That was an inefficient use of the time. I had to go right from teacher shows the kid how to do it, to We Do, to You Do. Which I hated. I couldn't get over how superficial it was. I didn't understand how no one seemed to be saying anything about it. It was like, "No. This is just how things happen here. We've got to get them ready for the tests."

INT: Your three new colleagues, there were four sections of third grade, right?

R: At first, there were three classes. I was the pull out teacher. They restructured it so that at first, I had the whole class of the lowest performing. We had this one floating teacher who would teach some classes of different things, and coach each in some classes. They changed it again. I can't remember when. I think it was in January or February. The class that I was teaching we'd pull out not quite half, ten of them at a time, to a special room because they were starting to realize that having thirty "struggling kids" in one class wasn't really working out very well. All sitting in rows. All of the kids in my class, not all of them, but we had seven of them who had IEP. You know what IEP is, right?

INT: Yes.

R: Individualized Education Program. Of course. Some of them with IEP, at least four of them, who had diagnosed ADHD. These poor kids just had to sit there with their hands folded, and they would rock and they would tap. Every time they would rock or tap or talk, you would have to mark it on the chart. If you had to mark it three times, then they had to go to time out. If they had to go to time out twice, they had to go to the Dean. There was about five, six or seven kids who just couldn't get through it. They were constantly either in time out, or in the Dean because they just physically were struggling to sit that still.

I don't blame them at all. The kids that I had taught up in the Bronx, they also had ADHD. Part of what I thought as my job was to find ways to make it so that even though they still had a lot of energy, and needed to move, and talk, and be active they could still learn. There are so many things that you can do, I think, to be active, so that they can still learn. Instead of this, they just got sent to the Dean. I had one little boy who got suspended probably once or twice a week. He wanted to talk, and he wanted to tap, and he didn't want to have to sit completely still. He couldn't sit completely still like the rest of his peers. It was really, really sad. I didn't think it was fair to some. It really was.

INT: Were these children with special needs, were their needs being met? Were their IEP's being paid attention to?

R: I'll tell you what, I never saw them, because we had a special education coordinator. She's the one that oversees what happens with all special education needs. I never even got to see the kids IEPs, so I don't know exactly what they specified. We did have one teacher for the whole school. She was the SEP teacher, Special Education something, I can't remember what it stands for. She would come once a week maybe, and take the kids out. I honestly have no idea what she did with

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them. I never saw an IEP.

INT: You were their teacher but you never saw their IEPs?

R: Nope. Those were in the office with the special education coordinator. Frankly, even if I had seen them, we literally weren't allowed to differentiate. We had to teach every single lesson in the same exact format. Every kid. There was no concept of accommodating. There was no concept of maybe having this one group work on something a little bit different. It was the most rigid way of teaching.

at 12:20 PM



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Labels: Brooklyn Ascend, charter schools, total compliance

5 comments:



skrashen 6:39 PM

" (The data analyst) took the mock ELA and the mock math data and analyzed it, and came up with these certain concepts that the kids weren't doing well on. Some certain percentage hadn't done well on the main idea questions. Some certain percentage hadn't done well on making inferences in narrative procedure type passages.

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NOTE the assumption that if you want children to do better on "main ideas" and "making inferences" we should give them direct instruction on "main ideas" and "making inferences." I don't know of any satisfying evidence that shows this is true, but there is a great deal of evidence showing that enthusiastic pleasure readers do very well on these kinds of tests.

If the charter schools knew this, would they turn to pleasure reading/literature/Book Whisperer approaches?

Reply

Replies



Douglas Storm 7:20 AM

If the question is, do these kinds of charter operations want to discover "best practices" for the education and well-being of the whole child, you know that answer. But, by now we understand this as simply breaking the spirit of the "unwashed" poor and unfavorably "dark" as a way to create successful submission to power hierarchies. Are we asking the Master to do a better job with the slaves? Or are we asking the slaves to rebel? Is there some other position?

Reply



teka21 2:07 PM

IDEA is clearly being violated. The children are being emotionally abused, and there is plenty of evidence that these teaching methods do NOT lead to higher level critical thinking skills. These schools need to be shuttered, asap.

Reply



Sheila Resseger 3:50 PM

No question this is emotional abuse and educational malpractice, particularly for the special needs students. It's a tragedy that the parents don't understand this. And this is what Arne Duncan thinks is the great future of American education?

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Gerald S 11:42 PM

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