

**Comments by Louisa Cruz-Acosta,
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Bienvenidos y Buenaventura a todos los que hemos llegado aca este ano.

Welcome and what good fortune we have to all be together today. I am Louisa Cruz-Acosta and it is my privilege and a real honor to participate in this panel discussion today, to share some of my experiences as one of the people who helped to establish a new kind of school in Washington Heights/Inwood, in NYC, The Muscota New School, now also known as P.S. 314.

I am very fortunate to work with twenty-eight very alive, very curious and vibrant 2nd/3rd graders in this, my seventeenth year of teaching in a NYC public elementary school. And, I must repeat what I have often said: were it not for the many lasting relationships I have enjoyed while being a member of groups like Prospect and the Elementary Teachers Network (ETN), were it not for the sustenance they have provided, I honestly do not believe I could have remained in this profession. I also know that we would not have had the support we needed when we first opened our doors at Muscota, in 1993.

It has now been 13 years since we opened our doors and began to examine the importance of continually renewing our commitment to the core values of these organizations which provided

our initial inspiration, our grounding.

Our school is ever in the making, as Pat says, a living work. There are many rituals that we hold dear and that allow us to remain Muscota, help us adults to feel alive, vibrant, and curious like the children, help us to feel important and special as a community amidst all the challenges we face daily.

I want you to picture one of our annual rituals, Mad Hatter's Day. It was just last month. It is a huge celebration where all the classes make hats that demonstrate their annual theme of study and we tell the Mad Hatter's story from Alice in Wonderland. Then we march around the school block singing and wearing our hats. Parents join us and prepare snack in the school cafeteria for all the children. (Here Louisa showed a video clip of Mad Hatter's Day, October 28, 2005.)

Our weekly Town Meeting is a tradition from the very first year of Muscota, 1993. It is our version of the "school assembly," one of several traditions brought over from River East. The entire school participates: every class, all staff and often parents and even younger siblings are there as well. It first started in the school cafeteria but now it takes place in the school gym so we can all fit together in one huge circle. (Here Louisa showed a video clip of Town Meeting, October 28, 2005.)

The children and staff sit together on the floor and some of us help lead the singing. There are presentations of projects and children's work that is shared by individual kids or groups of kids. Sometimes they perform dances they have made up or they sing. They make announcements about things they wish to share about their lives, a birthday or a new baby brother or sister being born. We hold our Town Meeting each and every week, first thing Friday morning. We celebrate birthdays monthly. Each person is celebrated. We even count down until all the numbers of years are mentioned. The kids love that because they get to know how old the teachers are, too.

During these events we also sing certain songs that everyone in the community knows. Some of songs have sign language that we have all learned or fun gestures that the kids love. We have a whole repertoire of these songs that includes the school's anthem, affectionately known as the Muscota Song. We also sing together every Monday morning, these same songs and some other popular songs that are played on the radio but are appropriate for children. This SING is only 2/3 graders and one 5th grade class. We make up music CDs and posters with the lyrics to the words so the children can read them and sing along. Often we rehearse and prepare the songs we will sing at the annual Movin'On Ceremony, which is Muscota version of a graduation for 5th graders since we do not go to 6th grade. We sing as

a way to learn about each other and our different cultures, to celebrate and just be joyful, to establish and nurture ourselves, to retain our sense of community or what I like to call the "Us" in the "We".

Storytelling is alive and well at Muscota. We do it often in our own classrooms. We practice storytelling at our Weekly Town Meeting each Friday morning and at staff retreats and, of course, at our weekly staff meetings where our circle has widened to almost 30 staff members now.

In my class we have "Story Circle," when kids and I share stories and we all listen to each person who wants to share an experience. The kids sit quietly on the rug in a circle and listen to each other's stories. They know that you do not interrupt or talk over someone during Story Circle; they just know because they can tell when it has begun and they get engrossed in listening.

Story Circle often happens spontaneously after the first few times. I model it for them at first, in the first weeks of school. Then they just do it themselves after that. They also act out stories in class as part of our daily choice/work time. It's always open as an activity and it's a favorite. Last year I modeled Story Circle by telling about my backyard neighbor who is always yelling at her grandchildren in her native language. It became a really funny story that the children acted out and then performed for the whole school at a Friday Town Meeting

with costumes, props and dialogue. It was called “Nightmare in Louisa’s Backyard”. It was hilarious but also dealt with serious issues like the need to learn to communicate in other languages so you can communicate with the older people in your family if they do not speak English.

I am often asked to tell stories about Muscota’s beginnings and I love that, to have those stories to give to the new students and staff about our history. I usually tell the stories in my classroom or at Town Meeting or I get interviewed by kids about Muscota’s History; Emmy’s kids are now coming to me with great questions about that.

These kinds of stories remind me of the “Tell me about when I was a baby” stories children often ask their parents or grandparents to tell. The children are really intrigued by these stories, like “How the Rain Stick Came to Muscota” and “Why We Celebrate Mad Hatter’s Day and Candle Light Night.” There is a class studying and documenting the History of Muscota now as their annual theme of “The Power of One.” They are interviewing the original staff members and some of the families and former graduates in order to know more about the school’s unique history. This is such an important thing to them and they take it so seriously.

Making and continuously remaking, re-envisioning, revising and re-inspiring ourselves while working in schools is a very complex work that

requires no less than our complete devotion and commitment. We strive to remain open to learning alongside the children and their families, and of course, our colleagues. So we actually work very closely together, teachers with other teachers, and teachers with parents.

We have organized this in several different ways through the years. Currently we have weekly grade group meetings to debrief about our work, to plan and share our thoughts about everything - curriculum, fiscal matters and parent involvement and inclusion, and how to best support individuals in carrying out specific instructional techniques. We eat lunch together and have a “common prep,” in other words all the teachers on a grade level have that as a free period next to their lunch so we have enough time for real discussions. We also meet with collaborating teachers (out-of-classroom teachers such as the arts teachers and literacy support teachers), to make our work with them more effective, more collaborative (hence the term “collaborating teachers” rather than prep teachers or cluster teachers, which we adopted last year).

We also organize around interests, participating in “Study Groups” around topics such as how to best use technology and how to integrate the arts and other academic areas into the curriculum and daily activities for the children. The staff has created and invested themselves in these groups.

Everyone on staff participates in a Study Group, even our school guidance counselor. We consider them to be essential in order to maintain a sense that each adult's learning is as important as each child's learning. The study groups meet about four times a year during regular staff meeting times, which are Mondays from 3:30-5:15, but we also meet on our own time. Each study group has a Chair who is responsible for calling the meetings, getting notes to everyone and keeping the group's work going in that way, by documenting it with written notes, too.

We also have annual retreats and take courses at various schools. We participate in professional development activities as individuals and in groups, learning about more and better ways to approach curriculum development in all the academic areas and especially in the arts, which are so vital and central to our program. Judi and the school support us in doing that vital piece of our work. The school supports us emotionally and financially. Yet, even when there was no support (financial or otherwise), these are the kinds of activities we engaged in, in order to sustain the vision of a Muscota New School that believes in the human capacity of all its community members as active, engaged and responsible learners.

Our school has gotten much bigger since it was started though and that makes it hard to keep the circle at times. It was increased in size in the years I was away but I am not sure

why; that's not a story I can tell since I was not there.

I am often concerned, though, about how large we are now and how hard it is to make the circle work when it feels so overcrowded that you cannot really attend to the children and families the way you would want to, like when we were smaller. We get funding for each child, of course, and special needs children bring even more funding because they require so many additional services. It allows for us to be rich in resources (both human and material), but I think we have more than we could ever need at this point and would be better off if we were smaller, especially in individual classrooms. We are up to 28 children in some classes and that is at least four too many to have enough space -- physical space, because our classrooms are way too small. It's also too many to have enough time and enough energy to really address the needs of the children and families without wearing ourselves out.

I often feel worn out, which worries me, and I know I am not alone. I worry that I am not really adequately helping the children who are coming from other schools. I am also concerned about how large our circle of staff has become. Recently we have been unable to fund the participation of all the staff members at our school-wide staff activities such as this conference and the last Fall Staff Retreat. Some staff members were not invited though we discussed this at length at a staff meeting two

years ago and agreed that all personnel were considered “staff” and these activities would be open to them if they chose to attend. These have been growing pains we have suffered in the last two years when our school grew by at least 10 staff members, due to the increased enrollment and to acquiring school status in July of 2004.

I think back to the time when Leslie Alexander, the first Muscota Teacher/Director, and I first sat in her blue mini-van early in one bitter cold morning in 1992 and talked about creating a “New School” across the river in a brand new school building that was still being constructed. We were both still colleagues at the River East Elementary School in East Harlem, NYC, one of the three original CPE small schools. I remember thinking about making it the kind of school I’d read about and heard about. It would be a school like Prospect but for city kids, a public school, a school for children of color and poor white kids whose families didn’t have access to a quality education in NYC, as well as a place for more privileged children who could also benefit from living and learning with children who they might never meet otherwise even though they lived in the same neighborhood. We’d been talking about the school only as a possibility, as though it were a dream that we could just enjoy thinking about. Then one day, she said, “Louisa, let’s do it.”

I remember I would strain my neck to look at the building each time I drove south on the Major Deegan

Highway on my way to River East and I’d see the small signs of progress in the building’s construction. Then one day, I saw them: brand new wooden cubbies through the first floor classroom windows. I began to see myself in that new place then. I began to imagine what it might be like to start a school of my own and to build it with others who believed in the things I believed in. I was so excited at the thought of it being new, everything shiny and new, yet founded on the values and principles I had seen being enacted at places like CPE I and River East (where my own children had grown up and where I had seen it all come alive for the first time) and at the Prospect School in Vermont where I had visited with my daughter’s 6th grade class with Bruce Kanze, who is in this room today and was one of the people who encouraged me to become a classroom teacher in the first place.

When Muscota was born I was already in my late 30s and had been teaching 4, 5 and 6 year olds for only three years. So, needless to say, I was terrified at first. But I also wanted to make a place of my own, a place I felt deeply connected to from Day One, a place I could feel at home in because it reflected my values, had been part of my history and I had also helped to shape its history. So, I agreed to give it a try. When people asked me about how we were planning to make a new public school in NYC, I used to say that I was old enough to have lived some and still young and

naïve enough to think we could actually pull it off.

One of the first things Leslie did as Muscota's new Teacher/Director was to ask each of us, the 5 classroom teachers, and 3 paraprofessionals, to write about our personal vision for the school -- to actually write it down. That fall, we shared these thoughts, hopes and dreams at our very first annual Fall Staff Retreat at the Blue Mountain Lodge in Peekskill, NY.

Here are some excerpts from my original Vision Statement. (Thanks to the documenting skills I have learned at Prospect and ETN through the years, I not only still had the Vision Statement; I actually knew where it was!)

1. My vision of a new school transcends all traditional notions of educational institutions as we've known them; school as I experienced it has been a formal alienating place where precious little of a child's own experiences, their inner life or beauty was ever welcomed or celebrated;

2. I wish to become a member of a truly learner-centered, family-oriented, culturally diverse community that values and celebrates the uniqueness of each member;

3. All learners in the new school community, adults and children alike, are invested, committed, responsible for their own learning, continually making choices and taking their work seriously. They

are guided by their interests, learning styles and rhythms. Learning is inquiry-based;

4. Assessment practices will include observing, recording and documenting the learner's progress, which is shared with the students and their families;

5. The core curriculum will be enhanced by the arts, which will be an integral part of the student's experience in their daily life at school;

6. A second language component that includes all learners;

7. Families will be an important resource to teachers and the school as a whole;

8. Teachers and staff will be encouraged and supported to engage in professional development activities that foster their growth.

Much of what I believed in then still guides me.

After 13 years, we still tackle many of the same challenges of working and trying to counteract decisions that affect the entire community in a complicated, impersonal educational system in NYC. We battle over the overcrowding in our small classrooms because of severe overcrowding in schools in our area and because we are the ONLY school of choice there, We are forced to administer time consuming tests so inadequate that that we cannot use their results for any real educational purposes. We battle to

get the necessary services for children and families urgently in need of support just to survive let alone thrive, We try to help children of immigrant families to acclimate and succeed in school. My Kendal (a pseudonym), a Muslim boy, struggles so with reading and writing in English. His mom speaks very labored English and she feels so guilty that he is having a hard time. We reassure her that he is doing his best and that is what counts for us, but he was almost held over because he failed both the reading and math tests last year.

We try to help the many new children who are rejected and labeled failures in other schools, some, by the time they are in 2nd grade. So many of them come to our school now and we really struggle with how to help them to acclimate and trust a way of life that seems very foreign to them at first. They are not used to being spoken to the way we speak to children. They are not used to being heard or cared about as people with experiences and feelings, with strengths that they bring with them, even at a young age. So, sometimes they do dangerous things or hurt other children and they have to be sent home early to make sure they do not endanger themselves or others, so they can learn how to live in a community that believes that all children deserve to feel safe and that there are consequences for dangerous behavior that threatens that safety.

The list of struggles and issues is long and yet, for every challenge,

there is also that moment when we look at each other across a table during a staff meeting and count our blessings. One of the rituals that we established from the very beginning at Muscota was beginning our weekly staff meetings with a “Highlight Go Round” where each individual person gets to recollect a moment that week that brightened his or her day and share that moment with colleagues. In the last two years the Highlight Go Round takes up a lot of time because we are so many more people now, but we do it because we know the importance of focusing on the positive achievements for us and for the children, of hearing where our strengths still lie.

We think of these kinds of rituals as ways in which Muscota “Turns The World Around”. We even have a school song that we often sing with the children that reminds us of that unique and grand purpose. (Louisa’s presentation ended with her colleagues joining to sing “We come from Muscota, Turn the World Around.”)