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City-As-School: Internship-based Learning in New York City Public Schools

Rachel Seher, Melissa Birnbaum & Alan Cheng

This article presents a case study of the internship program at City-As-School, a public high school founded in New York City in 1972 to foster experiential learning. The case study is constructed using the authors' practical knowledge as members of the school community, a transcript of a recent student graduation speech, and interviews with alumni. It is informed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1997) concept of portraiture, an approach to "inquiry and representation that seeks to join science and art" (p. xv).

The authors acknowledge our bias. As members of the school's leadership team, we believe in the power of experiential learning and identify as progressive, public school educators. We believe that our school offers young people a unique and valuable educational experience that few other public schools do. We also aim to apply both an empathetic and a critical lens to the internship program at City-As-School in order to reveal its "essential features" and "rough edges" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 6). We seek to apply a "discerning gaze" to the internship program in order to reveal nuances and complexities (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 6). Indeed, while the case study reveals that City-As-School's internship program has been transformative for many students, it also highlights internal and external challenges that threaten to compromise the program's Deweyan nature.

Historical & Theoretical Context

The notion of experience has been central to City-As-School from the start. The school was created during a period of administrative decentralization in New York City public schools. Fred Koury and Rick Safran were chosen by the then Board of Education to serve as the founding principal and assistant principal, respectively.¹ Both were "deep believers in external education," and the planning team, which included teachers and students in addition to Koury and Safran, drew on School

1 When New York City Mayor Bloomberg secured control over the city school system through the state legislature in 2002, he changed the name of the agency from the Board of Education to the Department of Education to indicate that it is a mayoral agency.

Without Walls prototypes that garnered national attention for breaking from traditional approaches to education and situating learning in the surrounding community.²

Several of the early planning documents deemed City-As-School to be New York City's School Without Walls. The original call for student planners expanded on this, inviting prospective students to “see the city as your curriculum” and “imagine yourself accredited as a reporter to a local newspaper... as a production-assistant intern at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in Lincoln Center,” or as “an intern at a labor union headquarters or a congressman's Manhattan office.”

“New York City,” the call stated, “is filled with outstanding possibilities for learning—experiences which can be intellectually rigorous, educationally sound, and able to be measured.” Most of the first students left their former high schools for their twelfth-grade year, and City-As-School served as an alternative route to earning a high-school diploma for approximately 80 students. No traditional classes were held at this “experimental high school,” and students attended internships every day (New York Times, 1973, p. 37).

City-As-School and other School Without Walls models were part of the progressive reform movement in education that flourished in New York City and nationally from the 1970s through the early 1990s. Central Park East was founded in 1974 by the nationally recognized educator Deborah Meier and ten years later, the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national network of progressive schools, was formed under the leadership of Theodore Sizer, a professor and later chair of the education department at Brown University. The Coalition, which expanded to include hundreds of schools, stood for ten common principles, including “personalization,” “student as worker, teacher as coach,” and “demonstration of mastery” (Coalition of Essential Schools). While City-As-School was not a formal member of the Coalition until recently, it aimed to actualize similar principles.

City-As-School was an early member of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, which was formed in 1997. The Consortium currently consists of twenty-seven high schools, all of which have a standardized-testing waiver. Students in Consortium schools graduate by presenting Performance-Based Assessment Tasks (PBATs) in the four core subject areas—English, Math, Science, and Social Studies—that are assessed using common rubrics aligned to state Regents standards. Graduates of Consortium Schools receive a New York State Regents Endorsed diploma.

2 The models included the Parkway Program in Philadelphia, Metro High School in Chicago, the School Without Walls in Rochester, and the St. Paul Open School in St. Paul (Progress Report 1, 1972, Table of Contents; Progress Report 2, 1973, p. 3).

What is unique to City-As-School, even among Consortium schools, is the extent to which learning takes place outside the schoolhouse. City-As-School is also unique among Consortium schools in that it is one of eight “transfer” schools within the network.³ Young people transfer to City-As-School after attending at least one other high school and sometimes as many as four or five. Some come from competitive selective schools, others from so-called failing schools that the Department of Education is phasing out or closing, and still others from schools that did not tap into their strengths and interests or meet their needs. What most City-As-School students have in common is a previous disengagement from school reflected in lateness, absenteeism, poor academic performance, or disruptive classroom behavior.

While City-As-School has grown to serve approximately 600 youth between the ages of 17 and 21, experiential learning is still at its core.⁴ The centrality of internships runs throughout the current visioning and promotional materials. A frequently used single-page document reads:

Many students who come to City-As-School (CAS) were struggling in their former schools, and we believe that continued struggling will not change behavior positively....Through internships that span the ordinary to the extraordinary, CAS students begin again to develop a keen interest in their own lives, education, and communities.

Experiential learning is seen as a way of re-engaging young people in education and re-connecting them with themselves, the adult world and our society.

In its dual focus on the child as the center of the learning process and experience as the primary mode of learning, City-As-School embodies two key progressive ideals established by Dewey and his contemporaries at the turn of the twentieth century. For City-As-School, as for Dewey (1902/2010):

The child is the starting-point, the center, and the end. His (*sic*) development, his growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard. To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth. Personality, character, is more than subject-matter. Not knowledge or information, but self realization is the goal. (p. 9)

3 “Transfer school” is the term used by the New York City Department of Education to denote “full-time high schools designed to re-engage students who have dropped out or who have fallen behind in credits.”

4 See the school website for additional demographic information: www.cityas.org

Furthermore, learning that begins from the child is active and organic rather than externally imposed. Dewey captured this notion, when he wrote:

Subject-matter never can be got into the child from without. Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within. Literally, we must take our stand with the child and our departure from him. It is he and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning.
(p. 9)

Dewey identified experience as the vehicle through which active, child-centered learning transpires. He characterized traditional schools as deadening in their imposition of the curriculum on the child, stating, “The source of whatever is dead, mechanical and formal in schools is found precisely in the subordination of the life and experience of the child to the curriculum” (p. 9). He advocated instead for learning grounded in the experiences of the child:

From the side of the child, it is a question of seeing how his experience already contains within itself elements—facts and truths—just the same sort as those entering into the formulated study.... Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made itself, outside of the child’s experience... It is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child’s present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies (p. 10-11).

For Dewey, the ideal was active learning through organic experience that extended outward and eventually connected to academic subject matter. City-As-School embodies this key tenet of progressive education.

The City-As-School model has morphed over the years so that it now includes classes based in the school building. While classes and internships are separate learning experiences, the classes mirror the internships in terms of their pedagogical approach. The ideal is that classes originate in the school building, extend out into the city and involve learning by doing. Both classes and internships culminate in final projects. In classes like Democracy in Action, for example, young people identify social issues that affect the local community, study them through qualitative research methods, and develop plans for taking action to address them.

City-As-School is currently the only public school in New York City with experiential learning at its core. As programs like Parkway have closed due to societal and economic shifts, models like City-As-School have become increasingly rare.⁵ This underscores the need for closer examination of the City-As-School model.

The Internship Program

City-As-School's internship program remains unique in its ability to actualize Deweyan-style experiential learning in the New York City public school system. This section highlights three key principles of the internship program that contribute to its success and sustainability and may inform similar work in other settings.

The Internship is Central

Natalia highlighted the centrality of the internship program at City-As-School in a June 2013 graduation speech. She said:

I was asked to give a speech today. I thought I couldn't do it... Speculating about what other people may think of you is paralyzing. If there was such a thing as a graduation speech internship, City-As would have us practice speaking everywhere—schools, parks, trains, and Madison Square Garden.⁶

Learning by doing in the real world of New York City is central to City-As-School's approach. Without real-world experience, taking on adult tasks is difficult. This is particularly important for young people on the cusp of adulthood.

The student schedule directly reflects the centrality of internships. Students participate in credit-bearing internships at one of over 300 organizations across the city for half of every school week. Most internships—like most classes—last for one academic cycle, which is eight to ten weeks long. Internships are credit bearing, just as classes are, and the academic credits accumulated through internships count towards the 44 credits needed to graduate from New York City public schools.

5 While many School Without Walls models have closed, the Rochester School Without Walls still exists, as does a school without walls in Washington, D.C. The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (MET), with schools in Providence and Oakland, is nationally known for offering learning through internships.

6 All names of students and alumni are pseudonyms. The graduation speech has been reprinted at www.cityas.org.

The school's staffing plan also demonstrates the centrality of the internship program. Approximately 40 percent of the pedagogical staff are full-time internship coordinators. The remaining pedagogues are in-house teachers and advisors. The internship coordinators are responsible for identifying internship sites and field-based mentors at those sites, connecting students to internships, creating a personalized learning plan for each student at each site, collecting daily internship attendance, communicating regularly with students and mentors, visiting students in the field, and working with mentors to support student learning. They are also responsible for working with students to conceptualize, implement, document and present unique internship projects. Projects are supported through a Resource Seminar that meets once a week for 90 minutes as well as through field-based visits and online communication.

The process through which students acquire internships highlights their importance. Students must interview for internships, which requires contacting the field-based mentor, setting up an appointment, travelling to the site, and interviewing with the mentor. Students can lose their internships at any point in an academic cycle due to poor performance or inconsistent attendance. When a student loses an internship, he must find a new one.

Most students, including Natalia, thrive in a school that makes internships a central responsibility, but a handful of students struggle with them. Some students are shy, some find the commute challenging, some cannot attend regularly, and some dislike the active nature of internships. Internship coordinators and advisors work with such students to help them identify internships that meet their interests and needs, and students who persistently struggle with external internships might be given assistantships within the school. While such measures do not guarantee success, they often help. New students sometimes find internships a challenge because they are not used to them. Travelling to an internship site, interacting with adults, and following through on responsibilities is significantly different from traditional classroom-based learning. To address this, the school recently created a Bridge program that places new students in supportive group internships. Now more new students are successfully earning credit in their internships than ever before.

Authentic Learning

At City-As-School, internships are not simply a convenient way for struggling students to earn academic credit and develop vocational skills, nor are they a reward for seniors with strong track records, as they are at many schools. Rather, as Natalia noted in her graduation speech, "City-As School teaches us to construct meaning through experience."

Students become apprentices to experts at organizations ranging from law firms to art galleries to science laboratories and develop personalized final projects that emerge from their internship experience and are shared with colleagues at their sites. Elijah, who enjoyed working outside with his hands, conducted scientific experiments to determine which fertilizer best promoted plant growth at an urban farm and presented this as his Science Performance Based Assessment Task (PBAT). Francis, who loved soccer but hated writing, researched the role of sports in small schools, wrote a paper documenting his inquiry and findings, and presented it to his mentor at the Manhattan Borough President's office as a Social Studies PBAT. Laura and Elaine, two young women actively considering aspects of their gender identity, analyzed their internship experience at a feminist bookstore through the lens of the writings of bell hooks and presented it as a Social Studies PBAT. These students explored and applied academic content in connection with practical experience.

As these examples suggest, the internship is also a vehicle for finding oneself as an individual and community member. Natalia spoke to the personally transformative power of experiential learning: "More than just being different, City-As helps us to become who we are as individuals." Students are able to explore their interests and clarify their values through internships.

Internships also provide students with a powerful opportunity to take on adult responsibilities and redress mistakes. As Natalia joked in her speech,

At a City-As speech internship we could experience: making mistakes, not showing up, making up time, driving a Resource coordinator insane and then finally, giving a speech and receiving credit! City-As-School encourages us to go out there and do it until we get it right.

Making mistakes in the real world, trying again, and eventually "getting it right" is central to learning and growth.

While many City-As-School students engage in authentic learning and find themselves through internships, some students never find an internship that appeals to them, although they may complete the experience in order to earn academic credit. Some graduate after only a semester, and some are unable to attend regularly enough to fully participate in internships. Internship coordinators and advisors engage in extensive outreach in an effort to re-engage them, but the outreach is nOt always effective.

Freedom, Choice & Support

The freedom to make choices is another central principle of the City-As-School internship program. At most public schools—and schools in general—students are given a schedule for the year. At City-As-School, the year is divided into four cycles, and students build their own programs every cycle. After creating a registration plan with her advisor, a student meets with internship coordinators and teachers at their desks and registers for classes and internships with them. The student then returns to her advisor with a completed program consisting of three classes and an internship for the cycle. In this way, the registration process resembles the registration process that young people typically encounter in college.

Students have a good deal of choice in terms of internships. For example, Nathan, who struggled with anxiety, elected to complete some Physical Education credits through an internship at a local yoga studio on Tuesday and Thursdays. He took yoga classes, helped to organize the studio, attended lectures, and used the bookroom. Ila, a strong artist, elected to earn Art credits through an internship at a local gallery, where she helped to curate events. Melanie, who loved animals, earned Science credit as a veterinary assistant at a local animal hospital. Lucas, who identifies as gay, earned a Social Studies credit through an internship at Lambda Legal.

In many cases, internship experiences translate into post-secondary opportunities. Stephanie, who dreamed about entering the fashion world, gained entrance to a competitive program at the Fashion Institute of Technology largely due to her real-world experience in a fashion showroom. Kendall, who loved to bake, was hired to apprentice full time at a local bakeshop, where she had interned.

Students confront very real choices in their internships every day. These choices might be as simple as what to do when running late, they might be fun choices like what kind of chocolate to create as part of an internship at a chocolate shop in Brooklyn, or they might be more challenging like what to do when a child is crying at a daycare center or how to handle a personality conflict with a mentor. If an art gallery is holding an exhibit, student interns might be asked to help prepare the physical space, email guests reminders, and welcome guests at the door. If a documentary film organization is holding a screening, student interns must ensure that their own film is edited and ready for viewing on time. If an elementary school teacher asks a student intern to guest-teach the class, the intern must prepare and implement a lesson. Making such choices requires taking on adult responsibilities.

Of course, young people sometimes make choices that have negative short-term consequences. For example, if a student is repeatedly late to or absent from an internship, he may lose the internship and have to find a new one. If a student acts unprofessionally during a conflict with a mentor, she may be asked to resolve the conflict before continuing with the internship. The school provides each student with a support network. All students are connected with advisors and each of the school's twenty advisors is an in-house teacher who is linked with 25 to 30 students. Advisors meet with their advisees weekly as a group and regularly for individual conferences. The advisor is the main connection between the school, student, and family. Each advisor is connected with a member of the guidance team, whose role is to support students in dealing with crisis, trauma, mental health issues, and long-term absenteeism. When students struggle to make productive choices during their internships, they will likely be asked to meet with their internship coordinators, advisors and guidance links.

The Student Experience

Natalia is not the only City-As-School alumni to view her time at City-As-School as transformative. Personal interviews with alumni suggest that transferring to City-As-School is a life-altering experience for many students. James, who graduated in 2008, said that his “favorite things were internships instead of taking classes.” “It was a big deal for me,” he explained, “because I learned better and more through going out and doing stuff.” James attributed his re-engagement in learning to internships:

I interned at numerous locations including P.S. 87, which gave me insight into teaching, as well as the Intrepid Sea Air Space Museum, which increased my interest in studying History. I forced myself to do well in classes because I felt, not only would it help me get into an acceptable college, but it would shape me into a more respectable human being. Once I began trying harder, I saw positive results, and so carried this positive attitude with me to college. It has proved incredibly useful. Not only that, but it has inspired me to be an artistic polymath. I have always written screenplays and short stories but now strive to do much more. I plan on writing and drawing comics, shooting feature films, publishing novels, and teaching at City-As-School. (personal interview)

James identified freedom and choice in a supportive environment as central to his development and learning:

One thing that I found admirable was the way that the teachers treated their students. They allowed us to call them by their first names, stuck around after class to talk with us, and tried to be as understanding as possible no matter what we said or did inside and outside of school. For teachers to be on the same page as students, it seems to require a great deal of patience and understanding. That does not mean that students are free to do whatever they want. It only means that students might not get things right the first time, and if they don't, teachers are expected to help pave the way with a healthy balance of discipline and care. (personal interview)

Brian, who graduated in 2001, describes a process of connecting to himself and the larger community while at City-As-School. Citing internships like the “Poetry Project, Educational Video Center, Boston NY AIDS Ride” as pivotal experiences, he says:

A lot of it was making me confident, making me believe that I could show up to any of these places and do well. It made me feel more connected to the city, that I know the city and have a better understanding of it. (personal interview)

Brian identified the ability to “try out as many things as you can” and “see what you're interested in” as a central benefit of the internship program. He attributed much of his own confidence and passion to his time at City-As-School:

My time here gave me confidence that I didn't have. Showed me that I could run my life, that I was in charge and not my parents, and that was huge. It was my first taste of adulthood. Making your own decisions. (personal interview)

Brian explored his interests, became more independent, came to appreciate the value of hard work, and deepened his connection to New York City.

Nora, who graduated in 2010, echoes James and Brian when she says that she appreciated the freedom to “take classes when and where” she wanted, about subjects she cared about. This aspect transferred to her thinking about college. She said, “The New School doesn't create standards for my education—I do.” Other aspects of City-As-School that Nora found important include:

Caring about us. Making us feel special. Finding our talent and helping us cultivate it. Giving us chances to redo what was previously deemed impossible. Knowing we inherently wanted to change the past, and that we were all trying to run from it. Acknowledging our drug use and not treating us like delinquents. Understanding our parents couldn't always meet so it was better to give us the power instead. Exposing us to internships and opportunities that no one would have ever thought

of bringing onto the table. Building our confidence by laughing at our jokes. Keeping us sane during times procrastination set in. Reminding us that there was always another cycle, another chance. (personal interview)

City-As-School made Nora feel special, cultivated her individual talents, helped her to learn from mistakes, and opened up internships and other opportunities. Even challenges like drug use were addressed without making young people feel ashamed or humiliated.

Final Thoughts

Although there are clear principles for maintaining an internship program like City-As-School's, applying these principles is far from easy. The external context has shifted since 1972. While City-As-School benefits from a standardized testing waiver that decouples the curricula from test preparation, the school is still subject to the same bureaucratic requirements and accountability measures as other New York City public schools. As Gary Anderson (2009) and others have argued, market-based education reform initiatives have come to dominate in the United States, since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 1994, and "business-oriented restructuring schemes involving merit pay, statistical quality control, site-based management, high-stakes assessments, incentive schemes, privatization and marketization" have proliferated at the local, state and national levels (Anderson, 2009, p. 10). According to Anderson, the singular focus on rules, procedures, and accountability measures that characterizes market-based reforms threatens to cause "a diminution of authentic activities in classrooms and of authentic relationships among students, teachers, and communities" (p. 11).

City-As-School, like all public schools in New York City, has been affected by this phenomenon, particularly since Mayor Bloomberg won control of the city schools in 2002 and appointed Chancellor Klein, who instituted a series of market-based reforms as part of his Children's First Initiative.

These reforms have affected the school's internship program in significant ways. High-stakes accountability measures, for instance, affect the school's willingness to experiment with new approaches. The accountability system created by Klein utilized attendance, credit earning, pass rates on standardized exams, and graduation rates as measures of success. These metrics continue to serve as a key component of yearly school and principal evaluations, which factor into decisions regarding principal tenure and retention. For example, the internship program and classes have

historically had minimal connection to each other, besides operating within a project-based pedagogical framework, largely because classes were added in order to allow students to fulfill very specific credit requirements and complete PBATs. While it might seem logical to more closely connect classes and internships, it would likely result in students taking longer to graduate.

External audits have also led to shifts in the nature of internship-based learning at City-As-School in recent years. During the school's early history, academic credit was awarded on the basis of experience at internships. The products created by students varied greatly and, in some cases, journalistic accounts of a student's experience was the internship project. A student would complete credit requirements in government by interning with a judge or in a lawyer's office and without writing a more traditional paper. Following academic audits conducted by the Department of Education's Office of Academic Policy, individualized syllabi were instituted to detail the academic credits and related state standards for each internship and internship projects became increasingly academic in nature, with a heavier focus on a written product that documents a student's learning in the area. While this approach to the internship project provides documentation for potential auditors, some internship coordinators feel that it limits the possibility of truly emergent learning. They feel that some internship projects seem forced in that the content and product are disconnected from the student's actual experience..

Bureaucratic requirements like individual syllabi for each internship have increased the amount of time that internship coordinators must devote to paperwork. In addition to creating written syllabi for each of their 35 interns every cycle, internship coordinators must also maintain student schedules and enter grades in a centralized online program maintained by the Department of Education in order to track each student's completion of graduation requirements. Internships are frequently interdisciplinary in nature and are individualized for each student. They are difficult to translate into the centralized program, which is designed for classroom teachers. As a result, a single internship might be listed three times under three different subject areas on a student's transcript. Internship coordinators are responsible for verifying the accuracy of the listings for each student each cycle, submitting paperwork to correct any errors, and then entering grades in the online system. This centralized tracking system is not only tedious but requires coordinator time that could otherwise be spent working with students in the field.

Negotiating bureaucratic systems is made all the more difficult by the political-economic challenges that affect all urban public schools. Many City-As-School students struggle with poverty-related issues such as unstable housing, lack of financial and other resources, family and personal illness,

substance abuse, and limited access to transportation. This affects their ability to attend school consistently and focus on learning. Supporting young people in overcoming such challenges so that they may fully engage in their internships is difficult in and of itself. It is particularly challenging, given that each internship coordinator works with 35 students per cycle. And although the school's faculty-to-student ratio is relatively low by public school standards, it is not as low as many suburban and private schools.

Internal and external challenges make sustaining an experiential learning program in a public school setting difficult, but City-As-School has shown that it is possible and worthwhile. Internship programs that capture the spirit of Dewey can be sustained in public schools, and the promising practices that inform the internship program at City-As-School can be applied in other settings. Despite obstacles and challenges, by making internships central, engaging young people in authentic real-world learning, and providing choice, freedom, and support, public schools can actualize the kind of experiential learning Dewey envisioned.

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Melissa Birnbaum is the internship department coordinator at City-As-School High School. A champion of progressive education, Melissa believes that the richest learning opportunities occur when connections are made with the world surrounding our daily lives. Her greatest joy in teaching comes from exposing students to different career pathways to which they would not have had access in the traditional school system.



Alan Y. Cheng is the principal at City-As-School, where he has worked as a math and science teacher, internship coordinator, and assistant principal. He is also a doctoral candidate at Teachers College. His professional and research interests are in designing learning environments that support adult and leadership development. Prior to City-As-School he served as a Legislative Fellow for the U.S. Senate Education subcommittee.