

Community-Based Education

Christine J. Villani and Douglas Atkins

Abstract

This essay poses to the reader the concept of community-based education as a means of replacing traditional methods of education. Based on work by Howard Gardner and James Comer, the authors discuss the importance of creating and maintaining community-based relationships as part of community-based education. The authors put forth the idea that in creating community-based educational systems, students go beyond the basic core academics and develop values and the freedom to express, develop, and solve problems or concerns they have for their community. The authors' present community-based education is a venue that is grounded in the essence of equality and leads to the development of intrinsic motivation within students. This also leads to high quality work and the development of critical thinking skills. The goal of the essay is to promote collaborative educational efforts between schools and communities for the betterment of our children.

Introduction

Howard Gardner (1991) states, "the modern secular school is encountered all over the world. In such a school the religious, moral, and political message that dominated (and also sustained) earlier schooling have receded in importance," (pg. 131). Education should not be seen as a "quick fix", a simple panacea, for producing a fully-developed, ready learner who is capable of

facing today's insurmountable problems and situations. Parents, administrators, politicians, business leaders, and all of those adults who have a stake in children's education must change their current paradigm; traditional methods of education are no longer satisfactory. Adults need to view education as a process for creating life-long learners. We must all stop expecting children to fit old models, and allow for the natural emergence of future citizens that embody creative spirit, critical thinking, and high standards. Creative spirit encompasses the internal drive, motivation, and external influences whereby our students try new things and develop different ways of viewing the world around them. Critical thinking by our students involves the student's ability to analyze strengths and weakness and give possible remedies for improvement. High standards refer to the idea of fostering excellence for all, and living with integrity. We must work toward building community relationships that facilitate such development.

Today's society needs to embrace the ideal of attaining and maintaining community-based relationships. Simple values like caring about the quality of life and striving for unconditional love of the human race must be manifested. Community cohesiveness is a natural human goal for which we should all strive. To do this, local communities must embrace their schools, schools in which students learn and grow into productive citizens. Community-based education fosters interdependence and leads toward educational and community practices that have the potential to impact people on a global scale.

Community-Based Education

Community-based education goes beyond cognitive capacities and encompasses the social and emotional aspects of learning. The relationships that children create with caring adults are the overarching premise of community-based education. James Comer asserts that the emotional and social development of students comes from the collaborative efforts of parents, schools, and communities (as cited in O'Neil, 1997).

The learning process of community-based education goes beyond the cognitive capacity of instruction in the "three R's." It expands the definition of "intelligence" to include the learner's ability to gain understanding, use knowledge, and solve problems, while developing a sense of self. Success is not based solely on learning core academic subjects, but couples academics with creativity and personal willpower through an emphasis on interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal development.

Community-based education is centered on the student's ability to recognize and support the needs of the surrounding community. In this way, students become accountable for providing values which stem from their

freedom to express, develop, and solve the inherent problems or concerns they have for their community. Over the long-term use of this ideal model, the entire community will become involved in the process, thereby making the educational process cyclical and continuously propelled. Reciprocal relationships based on these ideals will be promoted and fostered by all. Students and teachers are the fuel that generate community-based education. Parents, community leaders, administrators, school board members, and citizens are an integral part in the development, production, implementation, and assessment of community-based education. This cohesive interplay is designed to foster trust and belief in fellow human beings. It also creates collaborative efforts between school and community to solve various problems.

Unlike Gardner's (1991) belief regarding the emergence of community involvement, our view of community-based education focuses on the student's pursuit toward the betterment of his or her surrounding community. Gardner contends, "if we wish to have education of higher quality and more rigorous standards... then, as a nation, we must decide that we desire to have high quality education and that we are willing to work for it," (pg. 258). However, it is the authors' belief that through students' efforts, community-based problem solving can emerge and promote learning modalities beyond Gardner's definition. Students will seek, sort through, discuss, dialogue, prioritize, and solve community problems as an educational pursuit. They will simultaneously experience personal growth in academic areas. Furthermore, continued involvement within the student's locus of control will provide elevated levels of educational synthesis beyond prepackaged curricula.

A student's learning should not be contingent upon a set of stagnant standards. In community-based education assessment is the result of emphasis placed on creative and innovative measures as indicated by the learner. Learning modalities and student's needs for intrinsic motivation are taken into account as a further result by basing the venue of learning upon the student's desires. Community-based education is grounded within the essence of equality as witnessed in democratic society. The emphasis is taken off assessment and instructional strategies that are standardized; it is placed instead on high quality performance and the creation of life-long learners. For example, imagine an eighth grade class working with teachers from various subject areas to solve the problem of homelessness in their surrounding community. After research and discussion, the students go into the community to enlist the involvement and support of community members who can affect real changes regarding this serious issue. The teachers become responsible for developing integrated lessons within their subject areas. These lessons, originally conceived from the knowledge base provided by the students, will become necessary and beneficial learning tools required by the student to fully understand every aspect of the homelessness issue as

well as reasonable solutions.

The key to achieving these goals is the student's ability to accomplish a high level of quality in their work. If everyone is focused on establishing this, the educational process occurs effectively. However, establishing the necessary cognitive level is often contingent upon self-esteem. A student who is given the opportunity to establish and maintain self-esteem may become more attentive to his or her learning environment. Fostering students' growth by implementing tasks requiring critical thinking skills, long-term planning, and group efforts enhances students' self-esteem. Students' self-esteem is of paramount importance if teachers are to provide quality education. Additionally, a teacher's self-esteem needs to be bolstered by the school community. In promoting the teachers' self-esteem, the teacher brings his or her own sense of self into the classroom. This creates a circular process from teacher to student and student to teacher so that healthy self-esteem is continually promoted. Improved self-esteem occurs when worthwhile opportunities are provided for and internalized by all.

An appreciation for community stems from a person's desire to seek out and to value the company of others. Children need to have meaningful relationships with adults who are important to them; they must connect with the community in which they live. According to Apple and Bean (1985), the establishment of parental involvement, an emphasis on community, a child-centered curriculum, and parent-centered decision-making will be a necessary construct for the schools of tomorrow. Unequivocally, the global sense of community has been tattered and broken for the past several decades. Furthermore, this breakdown affects students and student learning. The way to restore the relationship that needs to exist between learners and their community is to provide bonding opportunities through the educational process. Giving students the ability to solve actual problems within their community is a fundamental approach for establishing vital bonds. Problem solving, coupled with traditional instruction, will lead to high levels of student achievement and self-esteem. The development of the whole child will be facilitated through the restoration of communities and community-based education.

A concrete example of community-based education is provided by the authors' use of community-based education in an eighth grade speech class. The unit was designed with the end in mind. This particular community-based project promoted the study of group dynamics. Eighth grade students were told they would eventually give a culminating presentation to discuss their honest and candid feelings about a group experience. The basis for creating groups stemmed from a purposefully ambiguous directive given by the teacher. Students were told they must create a group among their classmates and carry out an event or project designed solely for the purpose of helping others. Unbeknownst to the students, the design of the group was

carefully predetermined by the teacher. Students were given three colors. Each color represented either race, gender, or predetermined high and low achievement levels. After considering equal distribution of all factors, the teacher created a set color code pattern that equalized these three factors. The entire class was told that they must choose their groups based on acquiring the exact combination. As a result, cliques, friendships, racial polarization, and gender allegiance were eliminated.

Setting the groups took a total of four to six class periods. Many arguments ensued about the predetermined color codes. Animosity and frustration were directed to the teacher as the students struggled to finalize their groups. The teacher never suggested appointing leaders or creating a process for selecting individuals. As a result, students were forced to deal with varying personalities and characteristics. When the groups were finally in place, they were given a calendar and specific parameters for carrying out their mission for helping others. Considerations for telephone logs, field trips, permission slips, parent involvement, financial needs, social needs, and the like were discussed in a letter that was signed by each student and their parent(s).

The results were astounding. The community service projects resulted in city landscaping, visiting children at a nearby hospital, visiting nursing homes, arranging dinner dates with nursing home residents, raising funds for charitable organizations, and cleaning up the community. Some groups were not as successful in gaining widespread attention for the charitable deeds. However, each group did complete the mission. Areas of learning covered during the project included math, social science, physical education and health, science, history, literature, language arts, fine arts, and speech communications.

The student speeches covered a very wide range of feelings and learning experiences. One parameter set for the speeches was that no student could name another student, and if the anonymity of a student was jeopardized, the speaker's assessment score would be lowered. Typical with any group dynamic, students told of extreme frustrations with members who did not live up to the expectations set by the group. At the other extreme, some students were moved to tears when discussing the joy they felt when helping others, especially those visiting nursing homes and terminally ill children. Cedric Higgins, a well-respected and well-liked young man, hit the mark when giving his speech:

You see, our class was like a can of mixed nuts. We were all different in almost every area. Making everybody happy, I think, just wasn't going to happen. That is one of the two lessons that I learned. You can't please everybody. No matter

what, someone is always going to have a different opinion or feel “left out” and neglected. Now, the most important thing that I learned during this whole experience was that no matter where you go or what you do, you’re always going to have to interact with people—people that you may like—then, of course, people that you may not like. No matter what, you’re going to have to communicate with them. Now, I think if we would have put race, popularity, and intelligence aside from the start, then we probably could have accomplished much more. Not getting it right the first time was good. Like I said, we learned a valuable lesson, but we caught it by surprise.

Creating a community-based education may seem difficult and far-fetched, but it can be accomplished with outstanding results. We have not lost the capacity to envision and meet the needs of children; we have only suppressed it through misunderstanding the learner of today. We can no longer look at children just as our future. They must become our present. In the words of Albert Einstein, “no problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it...” (as cited in Wheatley, 1994).

References

- Apple, M.W. & Beane, J. A. (1995). *Democratic schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Gardner, H. (1991). *The unschooled mind: How children think and how schools should teach*. New York: Harper Collins.
- O’Neil, J. (May, 1997). Building schools as communities: A conversation with James Comer. *Educational Leadership*, 54, 6-10.
- Wheatley, M.J. (1994). *Leadership and the new science*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Christine J. Villani is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Special Education at Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey. She lectures and writes in the areas of leadership, supervision, school reform, and school law.

Douglas Atkins teaches English and dance at Roosevelt Magnet School for the Performing Arts in Peoria, Illinois. He embraces community-based education within his classroom and is an active member of the local community through his work at Roosevelt.