

Investing in Resilience:

Public Education and Voluntary Sector Partnerships

Stephen Huddart

Human institutions are adaptive responses both to our needs and aspirations and to the attributes of an external reality that we can apprehend only imperfectly. When economies and cities are designed and scaled to fit within the limits of that reality, they can be characterized as sustainable. When institutions are based on principles of inclusion and fairness, they may be described as just. When they engage human creativity, the results can be beautiful. Finally, when they adapt to new learning, to disruptions, and changes in circumstances, they display resilience, and persist over time. We can distinguish between systems that are *resilient* – able to endure through adaptation – and *resistant* – or unresponsive in ways that eventually result in their overthrow or collapse.

For the past half century, and with increasing frequency, educators, artists, scientists, philosophers, environmentalists and others have warned that even as our knowledge and material culture grow exponentially, society faces complex challenges arising from changes in systems and relationships: from migration and demographic shifts; from the unanticipated results of technology and globalization of the world economy; and, most urgently, from our impact upon the natural environment. Problems as serious and disparate as the cancer epidemic and the climate crisis are failing to respond to conventional, incremental remedies.

If our education system is to inform and prepare the next generation of students for the complex challenges we face, learning processes developed in the industrial era may not be optimally adaptive. How could they be, when they were grounded in the assumption that nature was something to be conquered? Many of the issues we face today can be traced to the compartmentalization of subjects and disciplines, and the resulting blindness to the effects our actions have on other living systems. Management theories based on deterministic models of human and ecosystem behaviour have also failed us. It is time to

replace them. Likewise, treating students as units to be sorted and graded according to their likelihood of success at university may have been appropriate for an era when 90 percent of students were expected to enter the workforce before completing high school, but is of little value in today's diverse classrooms.

As Einstein put it, "we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking that created them." The challenges at hand call for an education system that is inclusive, that emphasizes civic engagement, and that develops the skills necessary to work effectively across disciplines and cultures, in the places we call communities. The question is, where do we find the ideas and the leadership that can bring about this substantial and vital shift?

Recognizing the Voluntary Education Sector

Many new ideas arise at the borders of systems. Academics and educators engage in research and reform of the education system itself, but much that is innovative in today's schools originates outside the classroom, in a burgeoning set of programs and partnerships with the voluntary or community sector, and in the relationships being established by bridge builders who connect schools to communities.

A recent study notes that, depending upon how they are classified, between 8,000 and 13,000 federally registered charitable organizations now include education in their mandates. Whether as an expression of public interest, or as evidence of transformation in progress, it is significant that – without formal recognition or coordination – a voluntary education sector has emerged to complement and challenge public education. Leading initiatives have appeared in traditional domains like Canadian history (Historica) and mathematics (JUMP Math), and in emergent fields such as arts-integrated learning (ArtsSmarts, Learning Through the Arts), emotional intelligence (Roots of Empathy), and sustainability education (Evergreen Foundation, Les Etablissements Verts Brundtland).

Innovative school/community partnerships like those cited – and many more that exist at

a provincial or local level – constitute a critical investment in social resilience. However, while some voluntary sector programs have become well known, few educators or voluntary sector practitioners are aware of the size of the ‘intertidal zone’ between the public education and voluntary sectors, of the diversity of initiatives that have emerged, or of their potential to change both schools and communities for the better.

Making the case for community engagement and school success

“Though most principals, superintendents and teachers have a desire to do better and are working as hard as they can to provide a quality education to every student they serve, the road is rough and the going is slow. The lead villain in this frustrating drama is the loss of community in our schools and in society itself. If we want to rewrite the script to enable good schools to flourish, we need to rebuild community. Community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort.”

Thomas Sergiovanni, *Building Community in Schools*¹

Pedagogical approaches that focus on community building, that integrate community resources into the curriculum, and that situate learning in experiences in community settings, deserve consideration in terms of their contribution to both social resilience and student success.

In *What Works in Schools*, Robert Marzano marshalls persuasive evidence that “background knowledge” – acquired learning about the world, and about particular subject domains – is a stronger correlate of academic achievement than innate cognitive

¹ Sergiovanni, Thomas. *Building Community in Schools*. 1994. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass. p.ix

ability.² He claims that “learned intelligence” is undervalued and suggests strategies for leveling the playing field among learners with varied backgrounds and abilities.

The successful JUMP Math program, for example, works on the premise that if every student is supported in mastering the topic under study, each then has the background knowledge needed to tackle further work. Instead of testing to categorize students as winners and losers, truly inclusive classrooms become possible, and teachers’ work more manageable and more satisfying.

As a charitable organization, JUMP is able to attract an enthusiastic cohort of university students who volunteer as classroom aides and tutors. On the other hand, it must occasionally contend with opposition from educators and publishers committed to the status quo. Despite this, it continues to attract new adherents, in Canada, the US and the UK.

Marzano points out that mentoring relationships where community members provide ongoing support to individual students add to every student’s store of background knowledge. In another example, Roots of Empathy introduces a parent and a baby into the classroom, giving everyone an opportunity to participate in attentive care. Marzano adds: “By definition, a direct approach [to acquiring background knowledge also] means increasing the variety and depth of out-of-class experiences such as field trips to museums and art galleries or school-sponsored travel and exchange programs.”³

The ArtsSmarts program, which involves students in the creation of work that integrates personal perspectives with the theme under study, operates as a partnership between schools and local arts groups. The frequency with which teachers and students in such programs report a deepened engagement in learning suggests that it may be helpful to de-emphasize formal, “neutral” learning spaces, which can seem alien or irrelevant, and

² Marzano, Robert. *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action*. 2003. Alexandria, VA p. 133 ff

³ Ibid. p.136

replace them with an intentionally diverse range of community-based or community-related experiences. This kind of engagement can be an effective counter to high dropout rates, while liberating teachers from “command and control” strategies.⁴

This approach has also been shown to alleviate some of the difficulties faced by aboriginal learners, for whom the long shadow of the residential school system still colours learners’ experience.⁵

SIDEBAR

At Caslan School in Northern Alberta, which serves the Metis community of Buffalo Lake, inviting local artists to work with teachers in the ArtsSmarts program, and the introduction of fiddling and jigging, helped to overcome years of mistrust between the school and the community. The school now holds well-attended meetings in the community itself, and the school bus driver reports that her morning route takes an hour less than it used to, as students are keen to get to classes. For Northern Lights District Superintendent Ed Wittchen, hiring a regional community development officer was a natural next step in re-positioning similar schools and their communities.

Use photo provided if suitable

Community building also occurs in community service learning programs in which academic course work is conducted under the auspices of school/voluntary sector

⁴ Hume, Karen. *Engaged in Learning: the ArtsSmarts Model*. 2006. Ottawa. ArtsSmarts. Pp 4- 8. Available online at <http://www.artssmarts.ca/media/en/EngagedInLearningWEB.pdf>. *Aussi disponible en français*.

⁵ Stevenson, Blair. *Walking Tall in the Hall: A Mapping Review of ArtsSmarts Projects in Aboriginal Settings Across Canada*. 2006. Ottawa. ArtsSmarts. Available at: <http://www.artssmarts.ca/media/en/WalkingTallWeb.pdf>. *Aussi disponible en français*.

partnerships. For students, real world experience adds relevance and a sense of making a difference now rather than after a distant graduation date. In turn, youthful energy and enthusiasm can revitalize community organizations. It is worth noting that when they have an opportunity to exercise choice in the matter, post-secondary students are opting for this kind of experiential learning; a service learning movement is emerging on Canadian college and university campuses, involving students and faculty in a wide range of innovative programs.⁶

Creativity, community, and a sustainable future

“One of the most important movement strategies is to bridge the boundaries between the generations. On the one hand is the postwar generation that grew up with the suburban university. Schooled in the pursuit of economism, it is today its prime beneficiary. And it is seeing its failure. What this huge and powerful demographic force does in the coming decades – across disciplines, job categories, social classes, genders, races and geographies – is critical to planetary survival. On the other hand is today’s generation of students being schooled in a time of deepening unsustainability. And their future is at stake.”

- M’Gonigle and Starke, *Planet U*⁷

Einstein credits his imagination with the insight that led him to develop the Theory of Relativity – he mused what it would be like to ride at the front of a beam of light as it flashed across the universe. Creativity and innovation are essential capacities in a society facing changes on the scale that ours does.

We can also apply imagination to the challenge of how our schools can become powerful learning environments in sustainable communities. What investments and policy changes can we make today that would enhance their resilience? If we could imagine and design

⁶ See www.communityservicelearning.ca

⁷ M’Gonigle, Michael and Justine Starke. *Planet U: Sustaining the World, Reinventing the University*. 2006. Gabriola Island, Canada. p. 204.

our schools as “embassies of the future”, how would we describe them? What would our school *systems* look like?

Let me illustrate possible directions with two examples.

The first comes from the Quebec francophone teachers association, the Central des Syndicats du Quebec, whose EVB (Ecoles Verts Brundtland) program has been adopted by over 1100 schools in the province. EVB schools use a framework that promotes active citizenship through education in environment, peace, international development and democracy. Working with voluntary sector partners, EVB offers workshops in “investing in our communities...in citizens of the world’ that introduce teachers and students to community organizations and opportunities for action projects. A large cohort of volunteer retired teachers provides release time for classroom teachers to plan new units, and can be called upon to assist during major assignments. At an annual teach-in that takes place in Montreal, EVB students gather for workshops and performances, many led by students themselves. The event culminates in a colourful and noisy march through the downtown core – over 15,000 strong at this year’s event. These students are changing the world, and celebrating their power to do so. During the coming year, the Canadian Teachers Federation plans to introduce this model to the rest of Canada.

The second example is the Meadows School project in Coldstream, BC. For the past six years, teacher Sharon MacKenzie has moved her (Grade 5, 6 or 7) class into a seniors’ residence for five weeks in the fall semester and three weeks in the spring semester, with bi-weekly cross-over visits for the balance of the school year. Activities integrate inter-generational learning partnerships, core government-mandated curriculum, and community service. Learning outcomes are specific and yet wide-ranging, promoting fundamental human connectedness within a community context.

MacKenzie reports that first semester contact reflects the traditional grandparent/grandchild relationship. During the second term, students generally take on attributes of caretakers. The seniors show a noticeable improvement in attitude, physical

activity levels, and general demeanor. “From an educational point of view, this immersion has created an experiential field for children, fertile in authentic involvement with an older generation,” says MacKenzie⁸.

As these examples show, change can begin anywhere – in a classroom, a union, or a community.

Conclusion

Educators and voluntary sector or community partners are already engaged in the vital process of connecting their respective systems for the benefit of students and communities. This vast undertaking constitutes a vibrant but under-examined field, where much remains to be done. As Ric Young notes in his introduction to *Getting to Maybe*, “We must learn to be adept at the task of making change. It’s an essential modern competency.”⁹ For educators, this includes learning about voluntary sector programs and how to work with community partners. Professional development is needed both for teachers, and for voluntary sector practitioners, who could benefit by learning from one another’s successes and failures. Philanthropy has a role to play too – in supporting promising new initiatives and in disseminating the learning that arises from them. There is a particular need for research and policy on school/community learning partnerships. Finally, all of us as citizens – and especially as youth – need to be encouraged to play active roles in imagining and co-creating the schools and the communities we want. The future depends on it!

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⁸ Personal communication. For more information contact meadowsschoolproject@shaw.ca

⁹ Westley, Zimmerman and Patton. *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*. 2007. Toronto. Vintage Canada. p. ix

