

Naming Common Ground

Literacy and Community

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Our local school district has the slogan, “Building a Community of Learners.” So does yours, we’d bet. It is a ubiquitous slogan in education these days. Its popularity may reflect the hope that students will experience a sense of community in the closed and controlled environment of their classroom or education program.

Currently, youth workers make no assumption that children come to a program with an experience of community. Among the traditional responsibilities of public education has been the preparation of youth for full membership in the adult community and, while a wide range of educational styles and practices has prevailed, they have shared that goal of productive citizenship. Schools did not have to invent the community but rather had to sustain and revitalize existing ones. But now, education itself is supposed to provide the community, independent of the neighborhood’s realities.

Pius XII North Bronx Family Service Center has been providing community services since 1976. University Heights, the corner of the Bronx in New York City where we are located, is ranked among the highest-risk districts for children’s well-being by the Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York (*Newsday*, 6/21/95). Fourteen categories were used to determine levels of risk, including: percentage of children below the poverty line, infant mortality rate, unemployment rate for teens, number of abandoned buildings, number of abuse and neglect reports per 1000 children, and percentage of students who tested below grade level in math and reading.

At our community center, we grew accustomed to children who were still reading at primary levels as they entered their teens. When the staff developed a literature and literacy program, it was children with a passion for ideas, words, and learning who surprised us. We were surprised that even adults who grew up in the neighborhood wondered aloud how these eager and inspired children got that way, as if failure was expected. We realized that we had lowered our expectations for the children by designing the program accordingly. If we were to assume that children could learn and engage, then the analysis had to shift to the services being offered, and how they failed to engage the youth. We needed to refrain from seeking to find fault with the children.

In this study, we review the changes made to our traditional tutoring program during its evolution into a theme- and community-based curriculum. This article further reviews and analyzes why we implemented these changes and the impact they had on how we view the purpose of the program, its students, and the community the program is part of. These changes were driven not only by our observations of our young people, but also by our passion to create a program that has at its core a deeper understanding of what teaching and learning mean when connected to all aspects of a person’s life.

Literacy, Learning, and Community

The staff noticed the large number of students whose literacy skills improved simply from receiving some instructional and personal attention. Literacy didn't have value for the students by itself; but in communication with others it became worthwhile. We viewed reading and writing as social tools whose core goal is communication. So, we looked at the quality of communication among our youth and in our neighborhood, and we were struck by how difficult it was for children to describe common experiences. They didn't know the names of intersections near their homes or the name of that ubiquitous city bird, the "pigeon." We knew that they had all experienced pigeons; what were the implications of lacking the words to name them?

As communication is inhibited, so community is damaged. "Men live in community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to



to the Revolutionary War fort on the Bronx Community College campus. Their common ground is rich with the material to communicate basic scientific, historical, and social aims, beliefs, aspirations and knowledge. We merely had to move out of our center and into the community, and consciously begin to communicate to each other all that we share in common.

But how could we begin to build true community? Not an isolated "community of learners," but a community in which education would form the skills and values of the community at large.

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possess things in common" (Dewey, 1915, p. 5). Dewey went on to say that he was referring to more than the physical environment when he said "things" and did not even consider that those most basic "things" in childrens' environments would not be part of their communication. He was concerned with deeper values: "aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge" (p. 5).

But what is most basic to what we "have in common?" It is our literal common ground. We reflected on the youth we serve and their common ground, and we saw that they walk past the same bodegas with scraggly ginkos and small-leaf linden trees every day. The same rain washes their potato chip bags through the Harlem River watershed into that tidal channel and out to the Atlantic. They chase their kid brothers past the monument

What might literacy become in our center if we were purposefully engaging our youth on our common ground?

In creating a stage for our children's stories, we make choices. We stake out the geographies of their childhoods in home landscapes, consciously or unconsciously. To do so attentively begins by thinking as a native of a region. We become part of a particular world of earth and plants and animals and humans. (Trimble 1994, p. 131)

The skill to express one's own experience is a prerequisite to literacy, and these skills are practiced with others who have this common experience. We hope our program will begin to help our

youth explore these common experiences and begin to see themselves as part of a community in which the effort of learning these essential skills is actively and consciously sought.

• The Program

The following section documents a period (1996-98) when we explored how a program can help create a community in which the sharing of stories, knowledge, ideas and nonsense is valued. We struggled (and continue to struggle) to build an after school program that responded to those “at risk,” for school failure, addressing their individual skills and their need to share wisdom with others.¹ Using the theoretical framework we developed, the following segment illustrates the daily work of putting theory into practice. It is meant to be descriptive, providing documentation of one particular case of our actual work in the field, when change was attempted. It is only prescriptive with the caveat that our premise is that curriculum must be adapted locally; we state rules but they are only our rules, not universal ones.

History. Pius XII North Bronx Family Service Center began as a small neighborhood counseling center, but grew quickly, following a settlement house model. Our services include recreation, employment training, day care and education in addition to counseling at our center and at several public schools and high schools. Our services are free to neighborhood families and children.

The original model for after school tutoring was one-to-one matching of community volunteers and college work study students with elementary school students who had failing grades. This model met several extremely important needs, because students in great academic need were getting focused and consistent attention from concerned adults in a safe environment. The teaching tended to be reactive and focused on the short term: a failing report card or the day’s homework assignment determined what would be studied. This arrangement had its drawbacks. Due to the level of student passivity, when a tutor/student pair didn’t click, nothing happened. There were no other engaged students or engaging tutors/leaders to draw the child in. Furthermore, it reinforced the remedial model: You sit with an expert and have your problem fixed. The child was always playing catch-up. There was not much room for a tutee to be an expert on anything.

Over the years, we have shifted increasingly to working with small groups. The approach that we

have come to (we don’t want to say “settled on,” because we aren’t settled) is to have a group leader work with six to eight children; the group leader is supported by a variety of staff, so that there are usually two to four adults in the room with the children. It isn’t one-to-one, but any child having difficulty with the work will find support almost immediately. In this way, the uninvolved student doesn’t bring the process to a halt; the activity doesn’t stop, and, we hope, the student is drawn in.

All the children in our after school program spent one day in The Program Formerly Known as Tutoring. They came with their age group, so, if you were seven or eight years old, you came to us on Monday; this was the only activity at the Center for your age group that day. (On other days, the sevens and eights might have been at gym, arts and crafts, science, computers, or cooking.)

In all our programs, the afternoon began with snack and homework help. This was a quiet study time practiced throughout the agency, and by emphasizing homework we were all agreeing that: 1) Homework is important, and 2) Someone else should deal with it. Then each program could go back to doing what they do best. Time in our education program was reserved for our curriculum, not the schools’ agenda.

Curriculum. Our groups worked with themes and core curricula. We found that the most satisfying themes emerged from the natural sciences, so we could include labs and experimentation. We learned about comparative biology, waste recycling and forest ecology by maintaining a worm bin. We believed that you don’t “know” it until you’ve put your hands into it, because experience is learning.

We prevented the learning from becoming too esoteric by making it local, so the children encountered it routinely. The forest ecology module was based in University Woods, a block from our Center. We began studying the American Revolution by visiting the site of a British fort across the street. Why did they put a fort here? Who was fighting? What were they fighting about? Who won the war? (“The Dominicans!” an eleven-year-old shouts. Everyone cheers.)

Our tutoring program culminated in a presentation of the students’ work called The Museum of the Natural History of The Bronx. Each year’s exhibition has had a title: *What Survives in The Bronx?*, *Through The Bronx by Fin, Claw and Foot*, and *Know Your Place*. These titles reflect our guiding principles: Children learn by moving from the immediate to the abstract; children will commit to purposeful, productive work; and literacy and

learning emerge from a sense of membership in a community.

What do these principles look like in the daily operation of a program? (Toni-Ann, one of our group leaders, will comment after a philosophical speech of mine at a staff meeting, "Ok, that's very nice. It's almost 3 o'clock. What are we doing?") An example of moving from the immediate to the abstract is our mapping project. We wanted to develop a core of staff and students who could create graphics for the museum, primarily maps but also time-lines and graphs. Rather than working out of curriculum guides and worksheets, we began by mapping the rooms in our center. Even here, we found great diversity among the maps:



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different perspectives, different details, scales ranging from mathematically exacting to downright impressionistic.

This activity led to a discussion of what constitutes a good map and the inevitable question, "Good for what?" We could then look at different maps and study what the cartographers wanted to get across and who their audiences were: subway maps, military history maps, tourism promotional materials, environmental surveys. The concept of identifying an audience could then be transferred to the writing process and help in discussions of editing a working draft.

Administration. Running a program that seeks to help youth view themselves as learn-

ers and tries to validate the importance of their neighborhood, community, and themselves, historically and socially, called upon the use of many administrative skills. An important goal of our program was that none of the administrative chaos should manifest itself at the youth level of the program. Children who come to our program at 3:00 should have a room full of adults waiting to make them feel comfortable, and an afternoon of interesting and engaging projects before them. Getting to this point certainly was not easy. The program's departure from the conventional one-to-one tutoring and from drilling basic skills created both an exciting and frustrating atmosphere for staff at all levels. The three key areas in our administration were staffing, staff and curriculum development, and program materials and space.

Staffing. The program was staffed by part-time employees, college work study participants and interns from city colleges. Most of the people interested in the positions wanted to work with young people but were not teachers or pursuing a degree in education.

The program asked them to create lessons and activities based on themes provided by the local neighborhood, but the staff struggled, as did the youth, to find value or even interest in an area they had never viewed as a "real" study subject. Choosing the right people for the job is very important and this, ideally, would have been achieved with lots of time to interview candidates and explain the program. However, the pres-

sure of securing a staff to work with the young people on day one and maintaining the proper ratio of staff to youth sometimes made choosing the right people difficult. (Our initial criteria were necessarily revamped when "we start tomorrow and have only three interviews scheduled to fill seven positions.") Still, our people had to show a passion for wanting to impact positively the lives of our youth.

Asking the question, "What are some of the reasons you believe the youth in our program are failing in school?" usually became the tool used we used to decide whether to hire an interviewee or not. The answer that shifted the blame off the child and looked at improving the child's learning environment meshed with our program philoso-

phy. “It’s because the children are lazy and stupid” was the wrong answer, and unfortunately we heard it too often.

Staff Curriculum and Development. We now had a staff that was passionate about working positively with young people to create an environment of learning. The staff was also comprised mostly of young college students

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who were working part-time, going to school, raising families, shouldering responsibilities, and trying to fit this position somewhere into their schedules. It was useful to keep a youth development perspective when supervising the young folks on our staff.

Most of the people who joined our staff had no background in education, but held a strong commitment to young people and to the value of education in these young people’s lives. The program’s philosophy has been rooted in the teaching of skills through the use of familiar topics, so the ability to teach basic skills is essential. Using this commitment to the value of education to offset the staff’s lack of teaching skills highlights the importance of staff and curriculum development. Working with a strong outline of the year’s curriculum provided a focal point for the work, but left the details and specific projects to be determined as the year progressed. This process allowed staff to develop much of the program themselves and thus gain a sense of ownership.

In staff training and curriculum development, it was important to keep two important factors in mind. The first was that local neighborhood studies were not based upon existing information and materials, so the staff had to research and create materials to be used with the youth. The second factor was integrating the basic skills—reading, writing and math—into the curriculum through applied projects such as planting, compost bins, and community surveys. We held weekly meetings during which we examined teaching techniques such as journal-writing, creating flip books, using measuring and other math skills in the context of science experiments relevant to the curriculum. Training had to be responsive and continuous. We offered curriculum brainstorming meetings in

which the staff collaborated on turning project ideas and research into actual lesson plans for their work with the youth. Helping young people to see themselves as lifelong learners and to become comfortable with the learning process extended to every person in the program because everyone was challenged to learn something new.

Reward success with employment. Whenever possible, interns and volunteers were hired as staff, and part-timers became full-timers. This was a long-term strategy that strengthened the entire program. Group leaders have nearly always been former tutors: Because they have been trained in our approach, we can count on them to “speak our language” with youth and new staff.

Materials and Space. Along with the staffing of the program and the continuing staff and curriculum development, the daily routine of attendance, statistics, time sheets, staff issues, and material-gathering was a full-time job in itself. Materials were as varied as the topics in the curriculum because materials, in this case, included everything from pens, paper, markers, and crayons to resource books, museum brochures, old neighborhood pictures, soil samples from local parks, and even native plants that could only be purchased in another state. The program thrived on the creativity of staff and youth, so we tried to provide whatever materials necessary to fuel this creativity, but finding affordably priced materials for the projects and curriculum represented a substantial amount of work.

In order to create a safe, sane, consistent experiential learning environment for youth, the administrators made it a priority that the youth remain insulated from any of the issues of staffing, staff relations, and materials. The youth were coming from chaotic situations, so they were to experience a well-prepared staff, solid lesson plans and projects with all the materials required for the highest quality experience possible. Space, in its most physical definition, would be a safe, clean room conducive to learning: Younger children have ample space to work on projects and writing without distractions; older students have a chair and surface upon which to write.

Psychological space was also important. Space, in this sense, refers to the attitude of all staff and young people in the program toward the work being done. One purpose of our program was to encourage staff and young people to work on topics and explore subjects they knew nothing about, and this kind of work required a psychological space, a place to make mistakes, feel overwhelmed and ask a lot of questions, while constantly having works in progress.

We expected our staff to understand both kinds of space concerns by being professional and by striving for an environment that highlighted accomplishment and allowed for risk-taking by the young people. The creation of this space, a safe place where learning could occur devoid of criticism, demanded much work and professionalism. Running the program meant taking responsibility for balancing all these tasks and more.

Conclusion

Our starting point was literacy education in a community center's after school program. When we realized that a sense of disconnectedness and general passivity seemed to be the most common features of our at-risk youth, we began to seek a deeper way to examine those characteristics. Because it was such a prevalent feature, we turned to larger social factors. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the alienation of youth from society in 1967: "The sense of participation is lost, the feeling that ordinary individuals influence important decisions vanishes, and man becomes separated and diminished When an individual is no longer a true participant, when he no longer feels a sense of responsibility to his society, the content of democracy is emptied. . . . Alienation should be foreign to the young. Growth requires connection and trust" (King, 1968, pp. 43-4).

We began the process of change with two basic things: a real program and a reflective approach to evaluation. Having a real program keeps our theory rooted in the practical. Being reflective means that all invested members of the community, including staff, youth and parents, can envision what is possible. We must elicit all voices and perceptions to help us identify the needs of our youth if we view this as a larger community issue and not just an educational policy concern reserved for professionals. But to solicit other opinions, we are required to become a program which promotes dialogue. The sense of common ground and the ability to communicate has been a good beginning.

Our analysis brought us to this formula: Literacy requires the skill and desire to communicate; those skills and desires come from a sense of connection to one's community; instruction needs to be rooted in the local community; therefore, our program needed to move out of our confined space to engage that local community.

Like any community, our program is constantly changing to meet the needs of the people who belong to it. The staff is always involved in a continuous process of evaluation and reflection to keep the program's vision consistent with that of our changing community. Yet evaluation and reflection, as useful as they are, can also lead to distraction from the actual programming. It is essential to the success of a program such as ours to constantly re-focus staff energy towards the youth, moving reflections into actual hands-on projects and programmatic changes.

An after school education program can have its own identity, rooted in and responsive to the community it serves. It need not follow the agenda of the schools in order to provide real growth and learning opportunities. Furthermore, the administrator sets the tone with the staff that will be transferred to the youth, so fostering habits of reflection is essential, because assessment is constant. Concern for growth and learning must be central to all program components. While a dynamic program such as this can prove hectic for line staff and administrators, it should offer a stable and sane experience for the youth. Best of all, it never becomes boring.

Note

¹ Our founding director, Jim Marley, speaks of the incredible failure of local schools to graduate more than a tiny fraction of their students in four years. He says that "at risk" isn't defining anything about the children themselves, only the services they receive. "If you go to one of those schools, you are at risk."

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Art Credits: The images in this article were created by children in programs conducted by the Studio in a School, New York, N.Y. The originals are in full color; they have been interpreted in two colors for this publication. Artists are: page 47, Shawn Jones, P.S. 144; page 49, Christopher Cardonna, CPE II.