

Purpose: It Takes A Village

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Meta-purpose

I start with the African proverb made famous and infamous by Hillary Clinton a decade ago: “It takes a village to raise a child.” The brouhaha around her use of this proverb focused on whether it takes a village or a family to raise a child, but in modern society we need both. At the most basic level, public schools are our formalized “village”: they perform that part of child-rearing that we as a democratic society cede to our government¹.

Congressman Barney Frank has said that “‘government’ is the name we give to the things we choose to do together” (Patrick 2006) . Similarly, “public school” is the name we give to the child rearing we choose to do together.

Purpose

Parents try to raise their children according to their hopes and dreams for them. So should we as a village. Together, we hope for a future in which our children grow up to thrive individually in a thriving society. This implies physical, emotional and intellectual health and safety, economic success, an effective, shared morality, and responsibility for, and full acceptance in, their communities, large and small. Our success should be measured by how close we come to this ideal.

Origin of the purpose

I was raised by my parents, by the interconnected villages of my public schools and my community. As a parent, I have also raised children with the help of public schools and our

¹ In this paper, “government” conflates national, state and local governments.

community.

My parents' hopes and dreams for me were palpable (sometimes *too* palpable!) Their hopes for my physical and emotional health go without saying. Their reverence for the intellect valued but also transcended the economic benefits. When I was very young, they moved us to a community that was a community in many senses of the word, and which was also an important component of my moral growth.

There was a community clubhouse, pool, nursery school, and public elementary school, facilitating a vibrant community social life. Parents looked after each other's children as if they were their own.

There was a synergy between the community schools and the greater community. Shared community values promoted education², and the schools promoted community by socializing the children, fostering community among the children in the community, and giving parents something else in common.

Physical health and safety

Surely the village wants its children to be physically health and safe, and surely schools must protect children's health and safety while in school. Beyond that, schools have an important educational role here. Parents may teach what they will, but society also depends on us all helping to keep each other healthy and safe.

Emotional health

Since emotional health is tied to a sense of belonging, one way to promote emotional health is to

²Cohen (1988) shows that he values this connection when he says, "Social consensus about results is ... a resource of practice."

promote community. Included here is also respect for our differences including race, culture, religion and sexual orientation (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Promoting emotional health also includes teaching literature and the arts, both as consumers and as producers. This also includes counseling services.

Intellectual health and safety

Promoting intellectual health is the traditional explicit purpose of schools and still an important one, because this is one area in which families are rarely up to sharing this burden, even in healthy communities. It is ever more important for children to absorb as much as possible of humankind's intellectual history, both to benefit from it (individually and collectively) and to be able to make their own contributions. There are many levels to intellectual health, including factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge, creativity to connect old ideas in new ways and to come up with new ones, and intellectual rigor needed to do those things effectively. Students should be taught in a way that promotes a love of learning, which makes intellectual development so much easier and better (e.g. Cohen 1988).

Intellectual safety means that students feel safe enough to experiment with ways of thinking that are new to them. Safety does not mean we must be uncritical, but it does mean an atmosphere that rewards a reasonable amount of intellectual risk.

Economic success

Economic success, in theory, represents a win-win between the individual and society, in which the individual wins a reward for doing something that society wants. It doesn't always work that way, but that is the ideal our somewhat capitalist society is based on, so we want our children to benefit from it and contribute to it.

Many of our other goals for our children are consistent with this economic goal. For example intellectual health is economically valuable, as is learning standard English. But there are some ways in which this goal implies a different kind of teaching. For example, it is economically useful for our children to learn how to use the technological tools of the knowledge economy, regardless of whether those tools are otherwise useful in education.

Effective, shared morality

Morality is something we need to teach collectively more than individually, because we have a collective stake in morality more than an individual one. For example, if my offspring were to become thieves, that may not hurt me but it would hurt society as a whole. Society benefits from a *shared* morality, because morality governs both how we treat others and how others treat us. And this morality needs to be *effective*, meaning that it helps us to thrive together.

In the past, morality has tended to be the province of religion. This can work, more or less, when society shares a religion. But in a pluralist society we cannot depend on disparate religions for our shared morality. Sadly, the religious right is attempting to wrest morality from public schools, often under the guise of “parental rights.” But our children need to thrive together, so we need find and teach a common morality. This is a difficult task, but it is one our constitutional democracy must handle. Graham (1984, p. 49) hints at this goal, as well as our intellectual one,

when he tells us that our purpose is to “enhance the wit and character of the young.”

Community

Though we still have the minds of hunter-gatherers living in small clans, most of us today are members of many communities: our neighborhood, town or city, state, country, planet, school, interest groups, religious communities, employer, etc. The more each of our children feels valued and valuable in their communities, the more they will contribute and the more they will get out of them.

A school is of necessity a community. Schools need to take advantage of this teaching opportunity by using themselves as laboratory communities, scaffolding the benefits and responsibilities of community membership when possible. Anyon (2005) advocates school involvement with community activism; I would expand that to the community involvement as a whole.

The John Rawls School

Arrival

We approach the John Rawls school as many of our students do: on foot. Rawls is a K-8 school, itself quite a “village,” so we see groups of older children walking together and younger children with their parents. As we get closer, parents mingle. A few older children start to fight but then think better of it when they notice a few neighborhood parents nearby. This is a small example of how a neighborhood school promotes community: at a regional school, those parents, if present at all, would not have mattered to those kids. A community school and its community strengthen each other.

Students congregate inside in the cafeteria, where many get breakfast (most students in this neighborhood qualify for free or reduced breakfast/lunches). Parents are welcome and buy a quick bite and coffee. Some hope to grab a few moments with teachers who are also lured by the food (free for them). Enough parents come to school in the morning that the local transit authority has added a bus stop in front of the school. Parents rush to the bus stop as school begins.

Kindergarten: literacy, ability grouping and a safe and welcoming environment

Next we visit a kindergarten classroom. The class is sometimes grouped by ability, as it is now. The class is working on reading. Groups of able readers are reading *Who's In A Family* (Skutch 1997) to each other and writing illustrated descriptions of their own families. Groups of emerging readers are reading it and getting help with basic phonics, trying to come up with their own illustrated rhyming words. Because of the ability grouping, each child is working comfortably in his or her zone of proximal development and finds the work challenging. Lower-performing students in any environment, whether ability-grouped or not, tend to be stigmatized. We at Rawls work to overcome this stigmatization.

At other times, the class is grouped heterogeneously, and the more able readers are able to help the less able. This helps build the confidence and leadership skills of the more able readers but it does not do much for their reading skills. The less able readers gain from the one-on-one help, but are made even more aware of their own limitations as they are constantly reminded by the presence of their better performing peers.

Like parents, we at the Rawls spend a little more time and energy on the children who need them most, we try to maximize the education of each child This has an unexpected benefit in the

NCLB era. One might think that spending resources on higher performing students does not improve AYP (because those students are already passing the tests). But if higher performing students are attracted to the school and neighborhood because of the ability grouping, scores might indeed go up. With ability grouping, we believe we do not sacrifice the educations of the lower performing students either, since they are taught in their zone of proximal development, not above it. We keep our expectations as high as possible and we have a culture in which teaching the low performing students is rewarded, so we avoid many of the claimed disadvantages of ability grouping.

The primary goal in this reading activity is intellectual health, specifically literacy. There is also rigorous creativity in the writing assignments. This book depicts many different kinds of families. Children in nontraditional families who see their families in books like this feel safe and welcome in the community.

Seventh grade math: content and creativity

At Rawls, we strive for the student to create as much of his or her own knowledge as possible, but at the end of the day we have content that we want them to have learned. We try to help them to discover each new concept. This is where some of the rigorous creativity happens. But we do not expect our students to invent human intellectual history on their own, so when their imaginations fail, we try to add scaffolding to get them there. If all else fails we (gasp) tell them. Then we give them practice to make sure the content sinks in, and because skills are an important aspect of our goals of intellectual development and of economic success.

In this seventh grade classroom, students are trying to solve linear equations without having been told how. The class was able to solve $3x = 6$ easily and they do not see why they need any

formal technique because it's "obvious." The teacher then suggests $28x = 84$. A student offers a guess-and-check approach. This approach is creative but not general enough. The teacher applauds the student's creativity, promoting intellectual safety and creativity. Then she poses a new equation: $28x = 70$. The guess-and-check approach still works, though it is much clumsier because the solution involves a fraction. Class is nearly over, so rather than try to scaffold discovery of dividing both sides by 28, she simply tells the class how to do it. As visitors we may be shocked by this heresy, but we are encouraged to hear a few "I get it!" exclamations. The teacher walks the class through a few problems like this and requests that students do at least half of their homework problems using this method. She also includes a two-step equation as an extra-credit homework assignment, suggesting that students think about how to adapt what they just learned to this problem. This exercise promotes rigorous creativity and shows another way we invest in higher performing students.

Fourth grade English: a common language

In this classroom, students, including Latinos, African Americans and others are writing fiction. The teacher reminds students that, except in dialog, they must write in standard English. This is not because standard English is better than any other language or dialect; it is because standard English is America's *common language*. Full membership in any community is aided by speaking and writing in its common language, and fluency in that language is also important for economic success (Delpit 1988).

Conclusion

The philosopher John Rawls promoted a common morality within a pluralist society (Wikipedia 2007). This kind of morality pervades everything we do here, and it is an important part of what

we teach here explicitly as we try to be part of the village raising our children together.

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