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Abstract

This paper outlines the concept and initial implementation of an intergenerational learning community (ILC), a new charter school concept,[1] as well as review relevant literature. We discuss the mission, curriculum, educational design, philosophy, as well as, lessons learned from initial implementation of The Intergenerational School (TIS). Such multi-age communities of learners represent a conceptual and organizational response to the challenges that rapid cultural and environmental change and resultant alienation are posing for human societies

Key Words: community-based learning environments

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[1] We will use the words "school" and "learning community" interchangeably. School is the term used by states to charter these public education experiments. Learning community captures better our concept and signals differences with typical schools.

Intergenerational community schools: a new practice for a new time

   The rapid changes in human societies (especially of older persons) resulting from population growth, technology and environmental issues create the need for new ways of learning and sharing across generations. In this paper, we will review these needs of society and then outline the ways in which an intergenerational school could be responsive to these needs. Next we will outline the components of a unique school named The Intergenerational School™ (TIS) that is in development in Cleveland as our response to the State of Ohio's request for innovations in public education. Finally, we will consider particular challenges to the implementation of this educational initiative.

SOCIETAL NEEDS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN EDUCATION

   A variety of state, national and international reports (Donahue et al., 1999; Education Week, 1999; Elman, 1998) have highlighted the need to improve the quality of education for children and older adults. There is a need to create new opportunities for learning for diverse populations across all age spectrums. The needs and desires of senior adults for learning opportunities are, in particular, a growing area of focus (Scala, 1996). The proposed ILC will be located in Cleveland, a city that has experienced typical urban challenges to achieving quality education for its children. To serve the needs of our city, we will focus efforts initially on grandparents raising children because of premature death of parents and other novel kin care arrangements. The role of grandparents outside and inside schools can be critical to a child's education (King & Elder, 1998; Strom & Strom, 1995). Our educational programs will meet the need for such individuals who are often psychologically and socially stressed. We also solicited the participation of volunteers (De Acosta et al., 1998) and advocates for intergenerational

programs in our activity. The concept also addresses a growing sense that colleges and universities could provide more effective and collaborative learning environments for younger adults and for adults from a variety of professions who seek continuing education (Dellman-Jenkins et al., 1994).

Beyond the social need to improve the quality of education is the broader goal of supporting family and community structures (Denny, 1997; Hawkins & McGuire, 1998a). Families are being challenged to the point of dissolution by economic and social forces (Kozol, 1991). Learning together is one of the ties that can bind family members and strengthen relationships (Taylor & Dryfoos, 1999). A family's economic viability and health are highly dependent on the educational attainment of its members.

Moreover, in a time of increasing diversity in our country and others, there is an essential need to foster positive cross-cultural connections within and between communities. The establishment of community learning centers in the form of intergenerational schools seems likely to contribute to a sense of community purpose and to enhance the growth opportunities for current and future generations in that community (Kuehne, 1999). According to David Orr, communities are places in which the bonds among people and between people in the natural world create a pattern of connectedness, responsibility, and mutual respect while honoring diversity and mutual need (see Viederman, 1966). Our efforts to create the intergenerational community school can do much to combat our uncivil society by focussing on changing interpersonal and intergroup relationships in organizations (Shepherd, 1965).

Increasing attention is being paid specifically to the role of older citizens in their communities and to the importance of their contributions to future generations. A growing number of older individuals retire early, sometimes after several careers. This is creating a

pressure to develop opportunities for such retirees to not only enhance their own personal development but to contribute more generously to the social well-being of their community and country (Perlstein, 1998; Larken, 1998; Waddock & Freedman, 1998). Shifts in attitudes toward the elderly, and among the elderly themselves concerning aging, are occurring in a dramatic fashion, driven in part by the bulge in our population referred to as the baby boomers (Kline, 1998). Concerns have been raised that current entitlement programs cannot be maintained as the number of elderly increase. There is hope that older people will focus more on giving back to their community and will see learning and community involvement as a way of contributing to future generations.

An important issue that schools need to address is the effective and efficient utilization of resources necessary for economic viability. The current educational system is inefficient and does not provide good value for society. Economies are possible if a learning community is designed to optimize the use of resources across different ages (Goyer, 1999). For example, a single computer laboratory could be used for teaching children in the morning, adults at night, and both learning together in the afternoon. Unnecessary duplication of resources, including human resources, can be minimized. The efficiency of our education system affects the creativity and productivity of our economy in general. Increasingly, successful national economies are driven by innovation and technology transfer. Thus, countries that have well educated populations of persons of all ages are more likely to be successful in the global market.

We have outlined above the intended goals of improving quality of education, supporting families and communities, providing opportunities for the elderly to contribute to future generations, and promoting efficient use of resources in order to maintain the economic vitality of our communities. There are, however, broader scale social changes that we believe can be

addressed by the concept of an intergenerational community school. We are in a phase in the development of human culture, particularly in industrialized nations, that involve fundamental reorganizations of the way knowledge is created and disseminated in society. The control of information in many societies is changing in part as a result of computers and information systems (Fiere 1997). Distance learning will permit individuals to learn in new and different ways. A shift in power from the professions as the source and controllers of knowledge in society to lay citizens is occurring. Individuals are being empowered to take more responsibility for their own education and health. Thus new learning environments need to be created with different values underlying the creation and sharing of new knowledge. Education is seen as fundamental to the continued thriving of participatory democracies.

However, more than the reorganization of knowledge is the recognition that there are fundamental changes occurring in the underlying values of many societies (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). The term post-modern is controversial but it signals in many fields of human endeavor a discontinuity with post-enlightenment concepts of modernity. Modern society is characterized by a rational, scientific, technological approach to dealing with the world's problems. Post-modernism highlights some of the changes that are ongoing in the knowledge area of human endeavor but also highlights the importance of focusing anew on underlying values. Post-modernism is critical of many of the narratives of modernity, including the focus on technological solutions to problems. We believe that commitment to the values underlying an intergenerational community school will represent a form of therapy for the state of alienation and lack of meaning perceived to exist in many people's lives (Fiere, 1997). Loewen (1996) reviewed a body of literature and programs to examine the breadth of intergenerational learning programs and the characteristics associated with success. Commitment to well defined goals,

respect for values and enjoyment of community are such success factors that we will incorporate in our educational design.

EDUCATIONAL DESIGN OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL SCHOOL

The mission of our school is defined in terms of students acquiring the knowledge, skills, and habits needed to be effective members of the community. Both curricular content of the school and instructional design are concurrent with this mission and the underlying foundational values.

The curriculum of our intergenerational community school focuses on literacy, artistic studies, technology, environment, and responsibility for personal wellness. Literacy is broadly defined to include the skills of oral and written language as well as science, math and other disciplines. Artistic studies permit self-knowledge and expression as well as linking to cultural heritage. The importance of the information sciences and use of computers in society drive our focus on technology. Environmental sciences and health will be featured in the curriculum to develop good stewards of nature and community, as well as citizens who will take primary responsibility for their own health.

The analysis of social problems and emergence of solutions will require development of specific areas of intellectual inquiring and learning (Gardner, 1991). Specific aspects of the proposed curriculum for the school will address these domains of learning.

The content of the curriculum will be supported by congruent educational philosophies and pedagogical approaches. The fundamental premise of the school is that learning is a life-long development process and that knowledge is socially constructed in the context of culture and

experience in community. The curriculum will be supported by the following beliefs about

learning:

     1) All individuals are capable learners.

     2) Power and choice are shared.

     3) Differences and diversities are valued.

     4) Students learn through collaboration and cooperation.

     5) Individuals are empowered in the process of learning and

     6) Teaching by self-directed goals supported by appropriate mentorship (Zemelman et al.,

1998).

These philosophical principles are being operationalized in terms of instructional design

through the following elements: Non-graded multi-age heterogeneous groupings with flexible

looping to support individualized learning and instruction with mentoring and apprenticeship

models. The educational experience will be experiential and interdisciplinary in approach. The

learning environment will be inquiry based with specific projects to support learning goals. The

process of curriculum and school planning in general will be collaborative. Authentic and

normative assessment will allow us to modify our curriculum and its processes as the school

evolves and responds to outside change. We see the establishment of individual and community

learning goals combined with an assessment of whether these goals are achieved through our

outcomes evaluation program as essential. The goals will have to do with the behavioral and

cognitive abilities of the learners in the environment, their relationships to their families and

community and their broader contribution to civic life.

The TIS will be based on the successes of other intergenerational learning projects. For

example, family literacy programs and intergenerational computer learning are two areas in

which considerable experience has been gained concerning the attributes of successful programs. Community awareness projects and personal growth programs will also be used as models (Aday et al, 1991; Hawkin & McGuire, 1998b). Many of the features described above, for example, the engagement of learners in the design of their own projects are key. In addition to grounding ourselves in what has been learned in the past about intergenerational programming, we also expect to contribute in an ongoing way to new knowledge. Thus, the school will have strong research and dissemination aspects to its programming. Based on programs of continuous quality improvement, educational goals for individuals, and the school will be set and evaluated against established community criteria.

The learning community takes seriously the application of its learning philosophy and curriculum throughout the age spectrum. We do not adopt the traditional bipolar and unidirectional aspects that usually characterize intergenerational programs. By bipolar we mean programs that focus just on the very young and the older individuals omitting middle-aged adults. By unidirectional we mean that frequently programs are designed to meet the needs of one specific group. Our school will be multi-polar and multi-directional. Thus, we expect a major contribution of this concept to be to educate other middle-aged learning professionals about the strengths and weaknesses of our approach. Thus, the governance of the organization must live the commitment to a forward thinking, learning organization.

Finally, our community of learners will create an organization that supports our core values of personal integrity, choice and accountability--celebration of diversity, interpersonal skills, shared and responsible use of resources, honoring the interconnected web of life and time, and the work ethic.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

This paper has outlined the concept of an intergenerational community school and its initial implementation. We have learned lessons from our early experiences and from sharing the idea with others. It is essential for successful implementation that community support be built early. This process involves engaging community leaders of all generations in advisory boards and focus groups. Moreover, this community support should aid raising funds above and beyond those provided for this public school by state monies. The building of community support for educational innovation is complex due to local, regional, and national politics (Donahue et al., 1999). Support for community schools (often called public or charter schools in other states) varies across political and professional groups. Sensitivity to and awareness of these political issues are essential. The potential detrimental affect of community schools on existing public schools is a critical issue, as the charter school movement is seen by some as an effort to undermine public education through privatization. We will continue to try to build collaborative relationships with existing public school organizations.

Financial challenges also abound. Initial funding for start up is different than developing a sustainable model. Although educational research documents the effectiveness of small schools, the initial size of schools in start up phases may not be adequate to achieve economy of scale and financial viability without some form of additional ongoing financial support. In addition to adequate financial support, it will be necessary to recruit appropriate participants into the learning project. Participants will include learners across the age spectrum: children, middle agers, and senior learners. The marketing aspect of the program is important in that individuals must come to realize that this option for public education exists in their community. Focus

groups, surveys, and other devices are being used to generate data that will help refine the concept and programs as well as promote its presence in the community.

NOVALTY OF THE INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY SCHOOL CONCEPT

We have conducted searches of the educational and gerontological literature and the worldwide web as well as interviewed current leaders in gerontology and education around the country concerning the existence of intergenerational community schools. We have not identified the implementation or even the description of the concept described in this paper. Clearly, however, there have been intergenerational efforts that have involved learning (Ames & Youatt, 1994; Loewen, 1996; Hawkins et al., 1997). Typologies for these intergenerational approaches have been proposed based on increasing levels of interactions between the generations. At the first level, the activities of each generation can be housed in the same physical space but without any significant programmatic interaction. Here one might imagine a child and senior day care program sharing a physical plant. At the second level, programmatic interaction occurs but it is partial and often unidirectional. For example, children may visit with older individuals and tell stories principally designed to foster social interaction and prevent loneliness in the older individuals. On the other hand, older individuals may volunteer in schools to provide specific services to teachers (McGuire & Hawkins, 1998). Next youth and elderly individuals can team together on a project that serves a more general community need. However, the highest level of this typology based on the intensity of interactions would be when a learning environment is shared to meet learning goals of individuals in different age groups. This, to our knowledge, has not been specifically discussed or described, but is in fact the purpose of an Intergenerational School.

CONCLUSION

TIS is novel. We believe that this concept can address a variety of societal needs ranging from specific issues related to curriculum such as empowering serious thought and effective action about the environment and personal health to addressing the economic well being of the communities that the school serves. However, we also believe that such a concept can go far to addressing more ineffable social needs to enhance meaning in individual and community life. An organization that celebrates the successes of the community in the past and works actively in the present to create a new future can go far to addressing our individual alienation (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). It seems to the authors that building a sense of community around schools has been and will continue to be one of the most effective ways for creating an improved world. Thus in these troubled times in which the human experiment on this planet seems so tenuous we believe that intergenerational community schools represent a small but significant contribution to ensuring the viability of life on this planet.

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