Public Schools and the Search for Community

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In this article I argue that public schools can be a viable means of developing and nurturing community. I note that there are two forms of institutional structures: *gesellshaft*, with a rule-oriented, contract-bound emphasis and *gemeinshaft*, with a personal sharing emphasis. Each structure has aspects which can be detrimental to the development of community. I then suggest modes of skill development necessary for leaders in educational settings, if such settings are to enhance community, Finally, I reflect on two current issues facing schools in North America: the attendance of children who are from shelters or are the children of street people, and children from new immigrant groups. I make some exploratory suggestions on ways to integrate these students into schools to enhance community.

Dans cet article, je maintiens que les écoles publiques sont un moyen efficace pour développer et animer une communauté. Je souligne qu'il y a deux formes de structures institutionnelles: *gesellshaft*, centrée sur les règlements avec une insistance particulière sur le contrat et *gemeinshaft*, dont l'importance est mise sur le partage. Chaque structure a des aspects qui peuvent nuire au développement communautaire. Je suggère alors des manières de développer certaines habiletés pour les responsables dans des contextes éducationnels, si l'on croit que ces contextes facilitent le développement communautaire. Finalement, je refléchis sur deux situations actuelles avec lesquelles les écoles en Amérique du Nord doivent composer: la fréquentation scolaire des "enfants de la rue" et les enfants des nouveaux immigrants. Je suggère, de manière exploratoire, des façons d'intégrer des écoliers dans les écoles en vue d'améliorer le développement communautaire.

Spokespersons for a recent movement reflecting a critique of Western culture in general and American culture in particular have argued that the growth of democracy and democratic institutions necessitates a commitment to the development of community. Bellah and his associates (1985) write:

> Modern individualism seems to be producing a way of life that is neither individually nor socially viable, yet a return to traditional forms would be a return to intolerable discrimination and oppression. The question, then, is whether the older civic and biblical traditions have the capacity to reformulate themselves while simultaneously remaining faithful to their own deepest insights. (p. 144)

The authors conclude that, if citizens do not acquire the knowledge and skills needed to understand, articulate, and cooperate in the development and sustaining of human community, the idea of "the common good" loses all meaning. The result will be a Hobbsian world, where social existence is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and in short, a world governed by Hobbe's Leviathan" (p. 283).

Likewise, Heidegger (1977) notes that contemporary humans have succumbed to the idea that we are masters of our own fate. What is so destructive about such a ploy is that it fragments the self and the possible sources of understanding, meaning, and support which human community affords. It is impossible not to notice the fragmentation of our lives. And fragmentation is essentially the opposite of community.

In this article I contend that Western culture (and perhaps especially that of the United States) has lost both insight into the importance of the development of community and the means of effecting it. I share characteristics of authentic community as well as strategies for skill development leading to such community. I argue that without various forms of integrating students' experiences (especially but not exclusively new immigrants), any semblance of community is lost. Schools, then, can become the modus operandi for the reinstitution of community into the larger social fabric.

The Nature of Authentic Community

Pfeiffer (1978) has noted that human community is not defined by geography, by people living in close proximity to one another, but by certain characteristics of human relationships. Some of these are shared

values, customs, and purpose. In a different context, that of institutional organization, Deal and Kennedy (1982) characterize community as consisting of purpose, values, rites, rituals, and heroes. It is from identification with the above values and processes that community identification and commitment are formed.

Likewise, Pfeiffer (1978) argues that an authentic community consists of two layers. First, there is a primary layer in which groups are small, and in which much interaction, sharing, and caring are evident. A neighborhood of 20 to 30 people is an example. Then there is a second layer which consists of varied associations; however, for there to be community membership the associations need to be somewhat constant and the same individuals need to relate in similar institutional situations. As many as 500 people may belong to such associations. Even though there is less personal intercommunication, the members experience organization, structure, and power in a way that leads to solidarity. A local church is an example.

It is precisely the defining characteristics of these layers of authentic community (purposes, values, solidarity, etc.) that leads to activism. It is activism that allows the community not to become self-absorbed. Put differently, activism affords the community a shared responsibility and sense of control (however limited) beyond its boundaries. Recent community efforts at conservation and at control of their local public schools are two examples. But it is the first layer of authentic community from which support, caring, compassion, and integration occur. Yet, through activism the members of the community develop political skills, such as protesting, lobbying, and assertiveness. The first layer offers human solidarity and understanding; activism offers empowerment.

Community and Skill Development

As Hall (1986) argues, institutional growth of any sort depends on skill development. Ironically, Hall notes that for individuals to enhance authentic community seemingly incompatible skills are necessary.

Individuals need to possess instrumental skills. These are the day-to-day skills of organization, planning, detailing, and evaluation. In assessing community or extra-community associations and institutions which are oppressive, sexist, racist, and so on, evaluation skills need to go hand in hand with confrontational skills. In fact, confrontational skills are an aspect of the second skill mix Hall discusses — interpersonal skills.

At times attentive listening and empathy are needed. In abrasive, oppressive situations assertiveness, confrontation, and potency are required. In institutional situations within a community complex which are hierarchical, perhaps paternalistic, rigid, and inflexible, the latter skills are necessary. In other institutional contexts, where leadership is immature and seemingly incapable of decision making, the former skills are needed initially.

Another area of skill development Hall and Thompson (1980) term imaginal skills:

> Imaginal skills include a wide range of abilities: For example, the ability to fantasize and create new alternatives, to see the consequences of the alternative and to prioritize the most productive ones; the ability to criticize and evaluate situations and to read their potential and limitations. (p. 30)

Imaginal skills, then, include the ability to confront successfully. Being able to imagine the upcoming situation and to read the actors and actresses in order to fantasize the range of their possible reactions are two skills necessary in successful confrontation. Hardly anybody likes conflict situations, but the use of imagination is helpful in "living out" the situation before it occurs. Successful community growth, then, demands interpersonal skills of both a passive and an active sort; imaginal skills aid the interpersonal domain by allowing individuals to imagine events, situations, other's responses, possible alternatives, and probable consequences.

Hall and Thompson (1980) also discuss systems skills which include

> that peculiar blend of imagination, sensitivity and competence which gives rise to the capacity to see all the parts of a system as they relate to the whole system ... to the ability to plan and design change in that system so as to maximally enhance the growth of individual persons and parts of the organization. (p. 31)

System skills, then, allow the individual to envision how a particular action or reaction might affect the whole, that is, the effect of actions on the entire community (Craig, 1990).

Skill growth is also tied to moral development. Kohlberg (1981), for instance, notes the necessity of developing the interpersonal skills of empathy and role-taking for movement toward higher levels of moral development. If moral development is not merely a matter of using reason and logic to sort out cognitive alternatives regarding a particular moral dilemma (Craig, 1982), then extensive skill mastery in moral growth is essential. Although reason and logic are important, imaginal and systems skills can supplement reason and logic so that more sensitivity and sensibility, or what I refer to as the moral imagination (Craig, in press) can be developed. It also seems to me that such skill growth is a necessary but not sufficient condition of community understanding and solidarity. At the very least, it can be argued that the lack of such skills increases the likelihood of misunderstanding and community fragmentation.

Educational Institutions and the Development of Community

In discussing community a useful distinction can be made between *gesellshaft* and *gemeinshaft*. Gesellshaft refers to an impersonal, rule-oriented and contract-bound institutional structure or arrangement. Gemeinshaft refers to the more personal, caring, purposeful, and sharing type of institutional structure. In another context I have referred to the latter as institutional democracy, that is, institutional settings where subsidiarity, or the making of decisions at the level of impact, is practiced (Craig, 1989).

Thus, one issue in the development of a school as a community is structure. The school which has a gesellshaft emphasis will be

hierarchically structured in a rigid sense; that is, decision making will be top down. Teachers, for instance, may be consulted for various purposes, such as textbook selection, but feedback is minimal and teachers often get the impression that they are on "rubber stamp" committees. Such structure obviously militates against the development of community and creates an "us versus them" mentality. In other words, schools which stress a gesellshaft form of association can easily become adversarial structures, where various players, teachers, and administrators, for instance, compete against each other. Since personal growth cannot develop in such an environment; community growth is not possible either.

Since a gesellshaft gemeinshaft skill mix is virtually impossible for one individual (Hall, 1986), it would be incumbent upon leaders to recognize the gifts of members of the administrative team, as well as those of teachers and other staff. Put differently, the distinction between leader and manager can be helpful. A manager may possess the technical skills necessary to perform competently, but may lack the interpersonal and imaginal skills to be a leader. Thus, if the administrator of a particular school can identify not only his or her skill competencies but also those other individuals within the school who possess the potential for whatever skill mix he or she lacks (as well as the insight and courage to further train and refine others' skills), the school will have leadership at various levels. Such a situation enhances the possibility of community, as the needs and interests of a wider variety of constituencies within the school can be met. Thus, the affirmation needed for community solidarity can be realized. Put differently, the positive aspects of both a gesellshaft and a gemeinshaft orientation will be actualized.

Likewise, in gesellshaft association competence will be stressed. Leaders will be extensively competent to handle the complex technical operations of the school, such as legal or administrative tasks. Obviously educational leaders must be competent; if they are not, for instance, lawsuits will be increased enormously. Yet the skills necessary in a gesellshaft structure are quite different from those needed in a gemeinshaft one. The gesellshaft structure requires heightened instrumental skills to operate effectively, while the gemeinshaft association needs interpersonal,

imaginal, and systems skills. Although it would seem logical for a gesellshaft association to encompass leaders with strong systems skills, this is not the reality since systems skills include the use of imaginal and interpersonal skills (Hall, 1986).

It seems that it is difficult, although perhaps not impossible, for one individual to be gifted with all the skills necessary to lead both gesellshaft and gemeinshaft associations. People come to their reality from different perspectives and have differing talents. Some, by nature, view problems from a wide perspective; they look at the wider context of values and mission and make decisions in light of their impact on people and ideology. Others are gifted with the more technical skills associated with precision and detail. They approach problems cognitively, using reason, logic, and detailed analysis. Both sets of perceptions and the skills inherent in them are necessary for the school to develop as a community.

One way to accomplish this is to develop a team model of decision making. One large middle school with which I have been working has dropped the distinction between principal and assistant principal. Instead all three are coprincipals. A large high school is experimenting with a form of institutional democracy. Each grade has a principal who is responsible and accountable for the day-to-day operation of the particular grade level. Decisions are made collegially with teachers, students, and, if appropriate, with the staff. Complex legal, fiscal, or community-related decisions are made with the principal and whichever constituency is applicable. Until the time when schools can be much smaller, this is at least an operational attempt at community within these massive structures.

Selected Contemporary Issues

As I argued previously, one of the hallmarks of the school as a community is activism, and one issue that demands a proactive response from schools is the large numbers of street people, especially in North America's larger cities. Reyes (1990) has documented through interviews the sense of powerlessness and isolation of people living in shelters. Most

of the parents interviewed viewed the schools as part of the problem; they felt that the schools were not cognizant of their children's needs.

Without inditing anyone, Reyes (1990) noted the lack of planning by schools when faced with significant numbers of students who resided in shelters. He found that the numerous problems involved, such as the difficulty of obtaining records, were not considered with any systematic effort. As well, the learning difficulties of the new students who were at least one grade below level were not recognized for what they were — a problem beyond the school context. Some children had been in five schools in three years so there was little continuity in teaching and learning. As he noted, schools cannot be all things to all people, yet this is the burden put on them by the public. On the other hand, when a large number of students living in shelters appear in the school, if measures are not taken to integrate them into the school the school as community is disrupted.

There are a number of possible ways to accomplish the above.

- Share with the other students the fact that a new group of students will be attending the school, and help the existing school community gain some understanding of the background and problems faced by the new students. Although knowledge is only the beginning of integrating the new students into the school community, it is a necessary condition for the school to remain a community.

- If some of the new students are from cultures which differ from the existing student body, celebrations of ethnic/cultural holidays, music, and other art forms from the particular culture(s) are roads to further appreciation of the new students.

- Invite parents to the school with transportation provided. Encourage them to become collaborators with teachers in their children's learning. This would empower parents and perhaps help modify the feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness some parents might be experiencing.

- Establish peer-teaching. This would help to develop more positive relationships between new and current students. Care would need to be taken that such a strategy did not appear abusive — that is, that a further separation between the two groups would not be caused by the present students feeling superior.

- Arrange for community services, such as counseling. The enormity of the emotional stress of these children is difficult to believe; without intervention they may become severe discipline problems.

- Arrange for volunteer work in local food banks, churches, and other settings for the new students. This might empower them to begin to recognize their talent and worth.

The above suggestions are not exhaustive, nor are they an answer to the problem of the increasing number of children and youth of street people who are attending the public schools. They are offered merely to suggest ways the school might function better as a community in dealing with a problem of such enormity. Suffice it to say that if nothing is done no one gains. In fact, the inclusion of the new students would only seem divisive and may fracture the existing school community.

Another issue with which schools are currently being confronted is the increase of immigrants. It can be argued correctly that the dominant culture is not accepting of new immigrants. For example, there is suspicion that they are taking employment away from citizens. Yet, many new immigrants work at minimum wage jobs which others do not want in the first place.

There is a sense in which many of the new immigrant groups display a form of community which is closely knit, consisting of the face-to-face personal and supportive relationships representative of a gemeinshaft association. Oddly enough, or perhaps an indication of the North American distrust of community in particular, such immigrant associations, with their differing values, customs, and language, are seen as a threat. This may help explain why many new immigrant groups, such as

Vietnamese, Africans, Hispanics, and Koreans, resist the acceptance of the values of the dominant culture. This is a two-edged sword, as postponement leads to further discrimination. Yet, such postponement is enhanced by the attitude and behavior of the dominant culture toward such groups.

Actually, North Americans need what many of the new immigrants display: a form of gemeinshaft community. The schools, if they are to remain or to develop community, need to strive to support the preservation of the cultural values of the new immigrant groups. We need not fear cultural or ethnic groups which differ from the dominant culture. There is no logical reason to think that having values, rituals, customs, and language which differ from the dominant culture eventuates in disloyalty. As children and youth are taught (and allowed) to contribute effectively to society, they become participants in our common, unfolding drama. Certainly without the above, the school becomes either a fractured community, with biases and action against those who are different, or a gesellshaft form of association where leaders strive to keep students in line or to make sure they start to become like us. The existence of true community in the public schools is our choice — the choice of administrators, teachers, parents, and community leaders who embrace others and encourage them to participate actively in improving the school in particular and the society in general.

Conclusion

I have argued that the development of community in a public school setting (or anywhere else) is partly a matter of skill development. I have also noted that the integration of gemeinshaft and gesellshaft structures and associations is a necessary condition for the formation of community. Although the skills necessary to be effective in a gemeinshaft structure are different from those in a gesellshaft association, there are individuals in schools who possess the skills administrators may be lacking. As well, I have examined issues affecting the admission into public schools of children and youth from shelters or who are the children of street people and the new wave of immigrant children. I have argued that their integration into

the school and the provision of experiences whereby they can meaningfully contribute to the ongoing dynamic are necessary for any realistic sense of community.

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