



EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

JOSH BRODY, HEAD OF SCHOOL

Learning is an integral part of being human. There is a continual and entwined process of experience and reflection that takes place throughout our lives. It is this process that informs the way we live, what we do, who we are. Thus, education is not something that

should happen to us. Education is not something that should be done to us. Education is something that should be embraced and lived joyfully by each of us – each student, each parent, each teacher.

Given this vision of education, school can be viewed as one of many communities in a child's life which helps to shape lived experiences and reflections. School is a place that can guide children to gain experiences and skills that help them pose meaningful questions about themselves, their relationships, their communities, and their world. It is a place where children can learn how to engage in the search for answers to those questions. It is a place where children should be encouraged through their questioning to always imagine what is possible.

I believe in a vision of school as a community in which children and adults interact, think, and learn together. This vision necessitates that we acknowledge that the seat of learning resides within the child herself. The job of the school community is to demonstrate to students that they are just beginning a journey of life-long learning that should become and, above all else, remain for them a source of joy.

This vision of education enables us to expand our ideas of school to intimately include crucial members of the community such as parents and other family members. Thus far in my career as an educator and administrator in schools in Pasadena, CA, Boulder, CO, Jacaltenango, Guatemala, Santa Cruz, Bolivia, and in various locations in Nepal, I have witnessed the positive impact meaningful parent involvement can achieve. Thus, one of my primary interests has been to encourage and facilitate parent involvement in schooling. Parent involvement is critical to student success. Without it, school is a foreign and disconnected institution to the communities and homes from which children come. Active parent involvement in schools can close the social and cultural gap between school and home, make children's experiences in school more relevant to their lives, increase school accountability, and create a more diverse group of adults with whom children interact. Coming together as a community to take responsibility for their children's in-school education raises the stake parents have in a school. Their involvement can and should include everything from participation in and support of class projects to the upkeep and maintenance of the physical plant. It is important to acknowledge that not every parent and family member can be active in the school at all times. Therefore, it is the task of a good school administration to create possibilities for involvement that will suit the lives and needs of families that make up the school community.

The education of a child, including his experiences at school, is laden with value judgments. Everything that is chosen to be included or excluded in the conversation of a family or the books a child reads at school says something important about the values and priorities of that given community. Acknowledging that education is not neutral need not interfere with the attempt to examine multiple sides of any given issue or view things from varying perspectives. Acknowledging the political nature of schooling is useful, however, in that it enables concerned stakeholders to engage in open and honest dialogue concerning values embedded in the school's activities. Values that I choose as an educator include the pursuit of social justice, love and conservation of the earth, and finding value in diversity.

Many people seem to be interested in the idea of social justice but may not fully understand it as it is a vague term. The core of my definition of social justice is the conviction that every human life is as valuable as every other human life. A concern for social justice means a concern for the well-being of people in a neighborhood, city, country, or on this planet, most of whom one will never meet. Social justice requires

one to extend sympathy and compassion far beyond one's own known world. Information and the ability to analyze complex situations is certainly part of an education that fosters social justice, but perhaps does not go far enough. Students should learn to speak and write articulately in order to become effective leaders, communicators and advocates for social justice. But most importantly, the pursuit of social justice must be actively encouraged and practiced by a school community in order for students to become and continue to be citizens who pursue social justice. One significant way to emphasize social justice in a school is by making a serious commitment to service learning. Students should be taught to analyze factors in a community that lead to inequity and suffering. They can be taught how to plan and then take action that would help alleviate those factors. Peer tutoring and other types of inter-age collaboration can be both a valuable tool for teaching and a way to help students take responsibility for one another. Finally, students should be helped to reflect on the experience on a multitude of levels including the ways their service affects themselves and others.

Engendering a conserving love for the earth and the countless forms of life on this planet can be one of the most joyful parts of a student's education. Like social justice, this is a topic that can permeate much of the subject matter inside and outside a classroom. Whether the topic is science or history, or an integration of the two, students should be made aware of how their own and other people's actions affect the natural world. Through participating in camping expeditions, tending a garden, walking around a neighborhood, or even exploring their own school grounds, students can be encouraged to know and relate to their environment. William Blake says, ". . . if the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." My hunch is that we are all born with this understanding. We find fascination and infinite possibility in the world around us. Tending to the awe and love a child feels for her natural surroundings can bring that child joy, humility, and a sense of wonder. Ironically, these sentiments tend to dissipate, as we go through school. Not only does an outdoor, experiential education help to foster a love of the earth, it can help cleanse our "doors of perception" and heighten our senses so that we are more aware of our surroundings whether in the wild or on a city street. An important attribute of both service learning and wilderness expedition is that they can bring learning to life outside of a classroom, providing a concrete demonstration to students that their classroom is wherever they happen to be.

To cultivate a value of diversity in a school requires concrete and meaningful engagement with different ways of living, thinking, learning and believing. This engagement can come through books, stories, visual arts, dance, song, trips outside the school, and from the recognition of the diversity that exists within the school community itself. The different backgrounds from which we come should be celebrated and appreciated. Space should be actively created for students to share who they and their families are and what they value. Superficial symbols of diversity should not take the place of genuine exploration of the many ways of being and knowing. It is crucial for us to acknowledge that cultivating diversity may require challenging choices and tradeoffs to ensure that a school community remains true to its ideals.

Thus far, this discussion of the roles of students and family members in school communities has touched only tangentially on the roles of faculty and staff. The work of teachers and administrators is manifold. Faculty and staff must create an environment in which students develop core academic skills, become critical thinkers, effective communicators, engaged citizens, and joyful life-long learners. To achieve this, faculty and staff must be given adequate support and opportunities for their own development. They must be given opportunities to reflect on their practice in meaningful and constructive ways. They should be given support to nurture the spark of their own curiosity and stay true to their own journeys as life-long learners. A staff's ability to work together allows them to provide a learning environment that reflects the values of the community and an opportunity to model positive behavior. Enacting trust, patience, mutual help, respect and forgiveness helps faculty and staff to attend to the social, emotional and intellectual well being of students and each other.

By nature, schools are composed of people who are complex and full of foibles and idiosyncrasies. A diverse community inevitably brings with it diverse points of view. Children can be volatile. Demanding situations arise. Thus, my thoughts on a page about education inevitably appear tidier than the reality ever could be. But oriented with the ideas and attitudes I have outlined, children's schooling can be a time when a community of people, through their personal and communal love and questioning, come together to imagine what is possible for their children and begin their journeys to realize those possibilities.