

Jappalé: Exploring the Definition, Boundaries, and Potential of Community Integrity in Schools

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The State of Schools Today

Schools in today's society are labeled, much like the plethora of brand-named sneakers you find at your local sporting goods store. There are *private institutions, public school systems, home schools, charter schools, theme-based schools, KIPPS schools, international schools, local or neighborhood schools*, and so on and so forth. Each school sells their product, guaranteeing satisfaction in their own unique way, again in similar fashion to the sneaker business (only instead of catchy slogans and advertising, schools often publish jargon-filled mission statements). Each category of school carries with it a multitude of baggage, bias, and misconception. Just think, Asics offer the prime running shoe and Nike makes the best basketball sneaker. In a similar light, the public school system is primarily based on standardized testing, while private schools send their students to Ivy League Universities. Students and teachers alike are judged by their peers according to where they choose to learn or to work. The mere existence of so many school choices brings the question: what is the true purpose of school? Which school model has it right and what makes it such? Is the ideal prototype successful because of student background, financial advantages, or the availability of after-school programs? Surely, we have yet to decipher the code to utopian education.

The purpose of education and school is a conundrum in itself. Is it merely to move the learner to the next level of knowledge acquisition, or is it as Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, ranked #1 Best High School by U.S. News,¹ states:

The mission of Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology is to provide students a challenging learning environment focused on math, science, and technology, to inspire joy at the prospect of discovery, and to foster a culture of innovation based on ethical behavior and the shared interests of humanity.²

Perhaps the purpose of education can be summed up through Eleanor Roosevelt's thoughts on good citizenship:

Perhaps because there are so many books and the branches of knowledge in which we can learn facts that are so multitudinous today, we begin to hear more frequently that the function of education is to give children a desire to learn and to teach them how to use their minds and where to go to acquire facts when their curiosity is aroused. Even more all-embracing than this is the statement made not long ago, before a group of English headmasters, by the Archbishop of York, that "the true purpose of education is to produce citizens."³

Unfortunately in this business, window-shopping lasts only so long. At some point, students must choose which brand name they will invest their time, energy, and money into. The debate continues, and with it controversy prevails. No school quite offers the perfect embodiment or model of education.

What's Wrong with our Schools Today?

This is often the question – the white elephant in the room, if you will – when chatting with professionals who do not work in the field of education. Usually this slips into puddles of dialogue about NCLB, paying teachers based on performance, school closures, and then, somehow, seeps into sewers of discussion about health care, socialism, and politics. At the core of pressing societal issues is education. Stances with health care, politics, the national debt even (amongst other issues) are certainly affected by personal views on education, what education should look like and accomplish. It's the pulse of society. And, as cliché as it sounds – *the children are our future* – it is certainly true and is the pinnacle for societal purpose, sustainability, and progress.

Taking a closer look at the question, *what's wrong with our schools today*, it is easy to target curriculum. Critics – students, parents, teachers, the media, even – wonder why

¹ "America's Best High Schools: Gold Medal List." *USNews.com*. U.S. News, 9 Dec. 2009. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

² *About TJ*. Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

³ "Good Citizenship: The Purpose of Education." *Eleanorslegacy.com*. Eleanor's Legacy, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

certain courses are offered, neglected, and over-taught. Questions are raised about the research that proves the efficiency or effectiveness of such tools, strategies, procedures, and educational philosophies. Jenifer Fox, author of [Your Child's Strengths: A Guide for Parents and Teachers](#), in her September 2009 article from The Huffington Post entitled "What's wrong with our schools?", asks the reader to ponder typical school procedures:

I have watched teachers as they rack their brains trying to determine what box the history of science should fit into. Schools spend months arranging and rearranging their curriculum, lining up all the pieces in a grand sequential order known as the school's "Scope and Sequence." The assumption embedded in this sorting and labeling exercise is that there is one body of information which every child must learn and that we can divide this body of information into twelve grade levels, and then further still into five or six subject areas and 180 daily lessons a year. A lot of teacher confusion comes from trying to take topics that naturally resist categorization and force them into one of the boxes. We toss aside many great lessons because they cannot be categorized neatly.⁴

Schools are often so convoluted with data, numbers, statistics, and percentages that focus shifts to reaching a numeric quantitative representation of success rather than seeking individual academic and personal growth with students. Cheating is certainly not a recent phenomenon; however, the augmenting pressures for schools to meet standardized test score requirements is causing a collapse of integrity within the classroom. Kathy Lohr, of NPR.org, reports on cheating within Atlanta schools:

Still, testing experts acknowledge that these high-stakes tests create immense pressure for principals and administrators to improve scores, so there can be a kind of desperation that leads to cheating. James Wollack, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says how Georgia deals with this situation will set a precedent for other states. "Other schools, they should be looking to Georgia to say, 'Well, what should we be doing to reduce the likelihood of this happening here in our district?' " Wollack says. As the governor's investigation continues, Atlanta's public schools are now holding 12 weeks of remedial classes for kids who failed the 2009 tests, and the district is figuring out how to improve test security.⁵

Some would argue that it is the era of testing that wrongs our schools and shorts our children of a proper education. Yet, there must be a general measure of aptitude. Perhaps standardized tests are an effective tool in understanding a portion of student progress, but undoubtedly this should not be the only assessment utilized.

⁴ Fox, Jenifer. "What's Wrong With Our Schools?" *Huffington Post*. Huffington Post, 22 Sept. 2009. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

⁵ Lohr, Kathy. "Cheating Investigation Focuses on Atlanta Schools." *npr.org*. npr, 12 Oct. 2010. Web. 13 Oct. 2010.

There is also the argument that schools, public schools specifically, should have access to a greater fiscal budget. Recently Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder of the multi-billion dollar enterprise Facebook, donated \$100 million to Newark, NJ public schools.⁶ Is the future of success in public schools dependent upon philanthropy? Zuckerberg's donation is certainly a significant contribution, but in reality it's a small ripple in the ocean of citywide budgets and financial needs. Barringer High, for instance, the 3rd oldest high school in the nation, has a school-based budget for 2010-2011 at just over \$19 million dollars.⁷ While Zuckerberg's contribution should be celebrated, it is not the solution to the school district's woes. Thus, more money is not the end-all to solving school's problems in today's society. For every statistic that depicts a "better" education through an increased budget, there are models in the US and in the world that demonstrate success with student achievement in schools amongst budgets cuts and poverty.⁸

As the African proverb suggests, it does take a village to raise a child. But, this wise proverb neglects to state what the village looks like. Perhaps this is where it all went wrong. What did the sages have in mind when they said this? Plato, in the Republic, time and time again stresses the importance of the arts, music, and physical training, the very subjects that are often omitted first. Almost in the same breath, however, he highlights the importance of moderation. "And isn't it the philosophic part of one's nature that provides the cultivation? If it is relaxed far, it becomes softer than it should, but if properly nurtured, it is cultivated and orderly" (410e). In short, there is no consensus. The enigma is the solution to sure educational success.

Altering our Perception of the "Wrong"

It's easy to comment on the "wrong" under the huge umbrella of school. I wonder though what might transpire if we target our initial reaction and energy on what is right? Political and educational jargon aside, what is absolutely right about schools today, and yesterday for that matter, is the energy that our students, our children, our future, bring with them to places of study. This is the one constant within the ever-changing realm of school. It consists of, first and foremost, a population of youth, full of creativity and courage. Think of all the students who were considered "unsuccessful" in the school setting, but were later able to find purpose and meaning in society (The list is so long, it's almost arbitrary. Just google "successful HS dropouts"). This list does not illustrate to society the unimportance of formal education; rather, it highlights the tenacity and creativity of the human spirit.

What is "right" and exciting within our schools – all schools – is the potential of the creative energy and genuine spirit that students possess. Moreover, to truly nurture that spirit, it is essential for students to not only build upon skills and prior knowledge, but to

⁶ ---. "Can \$100 Million Change Newark's Schools?" *New York Times: Room for Debate*. New York Times. 5 Oct. 2010. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

⁷ *Newark Public Schools 2010-2011 School Budgets*. The Newark Public Schools, n.d. Web. 12 Oct. 2010.

⁸ Mathis, Jo. "Success Story: Low school budget, high expectations." *The Center for Michigan*. The Center for Michigan. 10 June 2010. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

utilize their skills in a manner that benefits a common goal and reconstructs, in a positive manner, their perception and genuine sense of community.

In the *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership*, John Barnett and Gerald Fallon, of the University of Western Ontario, initially set out to discover methods to build community within an all-male 1st grade class at a private boys' day school in Canada.⁹ They found that their study encompassed a much more complex issue: the variation in definition of community, itself. There are numerous levels of community within a school setting and not everyone is beneficial or positive, even.

Community was far more complex than we had anticipated, and it was not always a “good thing” for individuals. The form of community promoted by the school administration is prone to restrictive conformism and a certain degree of intolerance toward second-order change. Such a conception of community might be detrimental for some people because it could place constraints on individual voices, empowerment, and levels of contribution within the school (Barnett 10).

According to Barnett and Fallon, community is almost too broad of a term to define. Their research is compelling in that it questions the use of the word “community” when distinguishing between teachers, administrators, schools, and classrooms even. “As in our previous work, we again found ‘community’ was used as if it were a slogan (i.e., used by many people as if understood by all in the same way, yet not clearly defined and with multiple idiosyncratic meanings) which can be highly problematic. For one thing, we found that administrators and teachers appeared to be speaking in different languages when it came to the notion and purpose of community” (Barnett 4). From their study Barnett and Fallon emphasize that community certainly must be defined, but wonder by whom.

The different versions of community experienced by teachers and administrations in the same school at the same time highlights a much more attenuated and provisional nature of community in which the main pattern of interaction is coexistence rather than collaboration or collegiality. From this standpoint, we must always ask who is seeking to foster a sense of community, with whom, and why. (Barnett 10)

What Barnett and Fallon neglect to trace, however, is the meaning of community to the entities whom matter most: the students. Students must be at the forefront of school culture and establishing community. Granted, a school must have an administrative leadership willing to allow its student body control the reigns, but the school community – whether in the classroom or within the entire school setting – should reflect the ideals, energy, and creativity of the students. These will certainly change as the student

⁹ Barnett, J. & Fallon, G. “Conflicting Views of School Community: The Dichotomy Between Administrators and Teachers.” *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership* 2.1 (2007): 1-11. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.

population ages, matures, and gains valuable insight and experience. Thus, a school must have the tenacity to also change.

Creating a genuine community, whether in the classroom or within the entire school setting, transpires with personal sacrifice, personal and group understanding and empathy, a dedication to service, and an unyielding hope to improve the learning environment.

Community building is integral in establishing daily practices and norms, forming identity – both individual and school wide – and clarifying goals and purpose for students. Each school must find their own practice in building community, but the work should be continual, self-reflective, honest, and diligent. *What are the needs of the school community and how do our actions address the needs?* This should be the question concerning schools and not *what's wrong with our schools today*. To speak broadly about policy change in education goes only so far, considering bureaucratic procedures. To speak broadly about changing curriculum and addressing the pressures of standardized testing shuns the creativity energy and individualism of the students who pass through the many hallways. *What are the needs of the school community and how do our actions address the needs?* This question in turn can be related to the individual, as well. *What are my needs as a learner and how do my actions address my learning needs?* Through community building, students have a transparent model for how to build skills, knowledge, and attain goals. Students need tangible methods to utilize their energy and creativity to affect and influence positive change within the community.

Again, the conundrum of prototypical practice exists. How does a school build community? As we have seen in the other dimensions within the field of education, there is no sure prototype to succeed, but within schools, the formation and sustaining of community integrity should be inspired, motivated, and led by students.

Service programs offer students opportunity to build not only experience, but also to build capacity for school community and to build school culture and climate. There are numerous models of community service programs and a number of philosophies about their purpose and motivation. Is service merely a resumé padder, or does it have substance? How relevant is the service to the school and, again, to the needs within the school community? Should students be mandated to serve a particular number of hours or does that defeat the true purpose of service? There are no certain answers, only that in deciding these issues, the school community – the students themselves – should again be at the forefront of leading the dialogue and discussion.

An interesting example that delves into the issues of community, service, and student-led initiatives, exists within the international school setting at the International School of Dakar, in Dakar, Senegal.

Jappalé: A Model for an In-School Sustainable Service Project

ISD is a private English-language school that caters to the educational endeavors of over 400 students between the pre-K grade to grade 12. The high school is relatively small in number, with just over 100 students in its student body population. Virtually all

graduates pursue higher education in either the United States, in the United Kingdom, or in Canada.

In September of 2008 at the International School of Dakar (ISD), two 9th grade homeroom classes formed the foundation for an in-school service committee later entitled Jappalé.

At the beginning of the school year the homeroom teachers of each 9th grade homeroom class planned weekend activities with the students. The purpose was to build a sense of community within the 9th grade and to create an appreciation, awareness, and a motivation for action with community service.

The first activity planned was a “fun” day trip in which both classes visited Dakar’s local Magic Land – a theme park. The students bonded and found fellowship opportunities with new and returning students.

For the next event the two classes discussed the importance of a commitment to service. The students brainstormed various ideas about their interests and decided to host a Saturday field day event for the children of the maintenance staff workers. At the time ISD employed just over 20 maintenance staff employees. This staff is responsible for general maintenance responsibilities on campus – cleaning, repairing, painting, and the like. These employees are largely all Senegalese and face significant economical challenge. The economic disparity between the maintenance staff and the students whom the school serves is substantial.

The 9th grade students worked diligently to plan, to prepare, and to organize the event. The field day event occurred in November of 2008. Of the 20 plus maintenance staff workers, over 40 of their children attended the event. The 9th grade class students, approximately 28 teens, organized various activities for the children. Games were played in the school’s gymnasium, on the school’s soccer field, and an art workshop was held in a few of the school’s classrooms. After the 3 hours of play and art, the children and their families were served snacks that were prepared and provided for by the students.

The response from the maintenance staff after this event was astounding. A few of the maintenance staff employees who had worked at the school for over 20 years (of the 25-year history) expressed their contentment from the experience of the day, such as an event like this had never been organized by the school. They appreciated the mere gesture and willingness of the students to invite their families to utilize the many resources that the school owns and operates and to share time together, becoming acquainted on a more personal level.

The response from the students was equally astounding. These students no longer wanted to participate in the “fun” day trips to Magic Land, or to watch movies, or to site see. They became committed to building a stronger relationship with the maintenance staff and to doing even more than what they had already put together. It was from this experience that the seeds of a sustainable in-service school project were planted.

During homeroom class periods, the 9th grade students continued to discuss how to best combine their interests and energy to most efficiently and effectively serve the ISD

community. *What are the needs of the school community and how do our actions address the needs?* It was noted and recognized that many needs surfaced, but education was the primary driving force behind their commitment to this in-house service project. The 9th graders decided to raise money to sponsor at least one child (of the maintenance staff community) so that he may finish his education in Senegal.

The destination had been set, but the path to arrive there had yet to be cleared. The 9th graders were not sure how to go about enacting and fulfilling this idea. The homeroom teachers, acting more as facilitators of brainstorming, dialogue, and discourse, asked permission to share their ideas with the entire school, by way of the ISD faculty, to open discourse and dialogue and further the brainstorming and planning process. Interestingly enough, the 9th graders *granted* permission for the homeroom teachers to share their ideas, but stood firm in that this was *their* project and that any decisions to the course of action would be made by them. They created and took ownership of their community.

The homeroom teachers shared the field day experiences with the entire faculty and asked if there was any interest in exploring this in-house service project further. Numerous teachers responded and meetings were held to further explore how might this one act of service be transformed into a school wide program and initiative.

A core group of 9th graders dedicated themselves to contributing to each and every faculty meeting. Interested teachers met once a week regularly for over two months. The 9th grade idea of sponsoring a child's education was indeed a noble gesture, but there was some concern to the sustainability of the program. Questions arose, such as: where would the money come from, for how long would this scholarship/sponsorship last, how would that sole child be chosen and what cultural consequences (if any) would there be for the parents of the students who would not receive a sponsorship, and with such a high teacher and student turnover rate how can we ensure this to be a sustainable program?

These were not easy questions to answer, as no one was an expert on a project like this, and no one could ensure if in fact that this *was* sustainable. After much thought and dialogue, however, the group, which, at this point in time had become a school committee, created a mission statement:

The Jappalé Committee of ISD is a group comprised of students, faculty, staff, and parents which voluntarily works towards building a true and genuine sense of school community through strengthening our relationship with our Senegalese community members, learning from each other in cultural exchange, and offering academic and lifelong learning opportunities and experiences.

Originally, the committee's name was the Scholarship Fund Committee of ISD, however, after further thought and discussion, it was decided that a Wolof word would be most appropriate, as this is the predominate language of Senegal and the vernacular among the maintenance staff. Jappalé is the Wolof word for "support".

The 9th graders assisted with and approved of the language of the mission statement. The planning process came to a close in May of 2009 – 5 months after the November field day event. The Jappalé Committee was ready for action.

To date, the founding class of the Jappalé Committee are juniors. Some have moved from Dakar, as the student population is quite transient, but each of them has a unique bond in that through their creative energy, empathy and understanding, dedication to service, and unyielding hope to better their community, they worked to manifest school culture and climate.

Many events and initiatives have occurred through the energy and leadership of Jappalé. Firstly, the maintenance staff elected representatives to collaborate with the student and teacher led committee. This opened the potential for communication and community building even further. *What are the needs of the school community and how do our actions address the needs?*

In October of 2009 (and again in September of 2010), Jappalé led an initiative to provide financial assistance to the Muslim practicing families of the maintenance staff during Korite, which marks the end of the month of fasting called Ramadan. Through the work of Jappalé, each Muslim practicing staff member was recognized with a “Happy Korite” card and financial assistance of 25,000 CFA (approximately US\$50). The same was done during Tabaski – another Islamic holiday – and during Christmas and Easter for the Christian practicing maintenance staff families (this took place in 2009 and 2010).

Numerous questions arose with the financial aspect of this initiative. Was this merely a fundraiser? Is it part of the school’s mission, a secular entity, to honor religious holidays? Jappalé, however, viewed this from another angle. *What are the needs of the school community and how do our actions address the needs?* The simple truth is that holidays, though full of spiritual meaning and significance, can be a financially trying time. The leaders of Jappalé viewed the act as showing understanding and empathy within the community.

Also, in October of 2009, Jappalé led a school supply drive for the children of the maintenance staff. In the spring of 2010 Jappalé hosted several more field day events in which the entire community – students, parents, staff, and teachers alike – spent time together, building relationships and a genuine sense of community. The Jappalé Committee has continued to adapt to the needs of the community.

To date, Jappalé continues to assess needs within the community and how to better serve the community. It now encompasses interested parties from not only the founding students, but from elementary and middle school students, teachers, parents, administration, and the staff.

Effects of Community Building and Potential for Community Integrity through Jappalé

What has transpired from the experience of communal outreach from a grass-roots (in-school) level is school culture and climate change. Though community has many meanings and can be interpreted differently by every school entity, ISD’s community can

certainly identify with Jappalé. Moreover, it has become a building block for dialogue, discussion, and even direction of the school.

There are certainly many flaws with Jappalé, as it is not a perfect model for building community. However, it is inspiring as it was created by students and has had such an impact on the entire school community.

Time will tell if this model of community building will lead to higher test scores, higher graduation rates, or some other qualitative representation of success in the typical school jargon. However, the development of community through Jappalé's initiatives should inspire all schools to analyze their own method of community building. Communities will certainly exist, whether good, bad, positive, negative, effective, or incompetent.

Perhaps in considering the importance of school community, the wise words of Henry D. Thoreau should be considered:

We belong to the community. It is not the tailor alone who is the ninth part of a man; it is as much the preacher, and the merchant, and the farmer. Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself.¹⁰

Whatever model, strategy, or prototype a school utilizes to educate its students, it is with sincere hope that the issue of community building is considered. There is no formula for success. No standardized test can elevate a child's mind fully. No amount of money can prepare the students of the world for the future. However, a sense of identity and purpose, within a school community created and sustained by the students, however large or small, can certainly build individual identity, individual purpose, and create an appreciation and yearning for individual integrity that can last a lifetime and affect positive change that is certainly warranted in the 21st century.

¹⁰ Thoreau, Henry D. *The Writings of Walden*. 2nd Edition. Princeton University Press: 2004.