

Care in the Community

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ABSTRACT This text gives a brief insight into the potential which schools may have in their own communities. It gives details of ways in which the aims and objectives of other organisations in the community can be identified and linked to the aims and objectives in our schools. It's about a way of schools developing curriculum based projects which also involve working with their own communities in a way which benefits everyone.

For many years I lived about an hour's drive from the primary school in which I worked. I would drive in, teach, and then drive back. I thought that I was doing a good job and according to all reports I was. I produced exciting interactive lessons and inspired my children to learn. I soon became promoted and was pushed to move on to a new school somewhere else and work my way up. 'You can't stay in a job longer than five years – you'll lose it and go stale' seemed like very good advice and I couldn't fault it in its logic. But somehow I felt it wasn't right for me. I couldn't put my finger on it and my thoughts turned to whether I had the confidence to do it or whether I was good enough. I suspect I am not the only self-critical paranoid teacher in the country and the more I was told I should move on, the worse I began to feel. Eventually I moved to the area of the school and instead of living in Brighton I lived near the school. It was then that I began to realise that after several years of working in the school I didn't have a clue about the area.

Living in the area began to have its own benefits. I would read the local paper and began to get involved in local issues. It then occurred to me to use local issues as the subject for work in the classroom. I started using issues from the community to base my lessons around. What I found was the children got even more involved in the ideas and would express strong opinions. I then began to realise that I started to express strong opinions about my own community, and that is when I realised I had started to care about my own community.

On the Need to Care Politically

I had always known that care in the school sense is very important. We all have a duty of care to our children and ourselves. But I had only ever seen this in terms of physical and mental well-being and learning as a big contributor to this. What I had failed to recognise, and what is the central theme of this text, is the need to care politically. Care must contain a passion about your own local community. To do this you have to get involved in what is going on around your school and make your students understand that they too can care in a very political way. I am not talking about politics in the form that our government chooses to give us, but a much more real and direct approach. As a nation we seem to have lost touch with our own connection and political potency as an individual or as a group. Politics should be something to get really excited about; people in other countries where democracies are only truly just emerging seem to be very passionate. Have we lost the will to care politically, and more important, are we passing this apathy on to our children?

Opinion and debate are at the core of learning. The ability to express an opinion must be improved not because we want 80% of our Key Stage 2 children to achieve level 4 in English: it is much, much more important than that. If we don't engender the next generation with the passion and belief in being able to effect change then, with the sad decline of British politics into a cosy choice between personalities much like those on *Pop Idol*, only less popular, the future looks bleak.

Education Needs to Scale Itself Down

I am not suggesting that we develop political activists to bring about some kind of revolution; rather, I am advocating a more subtle community-based approach. As our villages turn into towns and towns into cities it would be easy to see how the loss of our political voice could go unnoticed. Education, I believe, needs to scale itself down. Schools must operate on a smaller scale within their own communities. We should be trying to turn our city schools into village schools, not the other way round. Break larger schools into smaller pieces it becomes much easier to care. With care comes responsibility and when you are lost in the crowd it is easy to lose connection and responsibility and ultimately the ability to care. This can only lead to an uncaring society, of which I for one do not want to be part.

I have developed several projects within my school which effectively work towards this. They were not set out with this political aim but it is only now that I reflect back that I realise their significance. They also have the great advantage of achieving success in learning in a much more exciting way.

Project 1. Chestnut Tree Hospice

The first project was called the 'Chestnut Tree' after a local children's hospice which needed financial support. We decided with the children (Year 6) to do

some fundraising for the hospice. This in itself was not unusual, but the approach we took may have been. It was a project that was led by the children, so the first thing they wanted to know (as children always do) was the bit about dying and what was actually wrong with the children. The hospice very bravely sent in one of their nurses to be interviewed by the children. I have found that if visitors to my classes can bear it, a dialogue with the children works much better than a prepared speech. You are what you are, as they say. The children showed a huge sensitivity and curiosity over the illnesses. One child asked the key worker from the hospice how she felt when one of her children died. She did not answer verbally; the look on her face said it all. These are moments which cannot be engineered and are so valuable to children. At this point the children more or less decided that the hospice needed their help. The hospice very kindly invited the children there one evening when it was empty and gave them a guided tour. Again the children showed a level of curiosity minus any sense of embarrassment, and were particularly interested in the death bed and why the room had to be so cold.

There were two things which came from this visit. First was the palpable sense of anger amongst the children when they found out that, unlike normal hospitals, they received no money from the government. This resulted in several letters to MPs among which replies promised meetings with local hospital boards (passing the buck). This was children showing a level of political care which helps to engage the future generation.

The second thing to come out of the project was the development of expertise in fundraising. The children asked for help with fundraising so the hospice sent their fundraiser for them to interview and pick apart her expertise. The children had their own ideas, but she gave them the techniques and approaches they needed. They wrote letters, phoned people up, made posters, organised events and generally made a lot of noise and mess. This, I might add, was in the spring term when they perhaps should have been studying for their Standard Assessment Tests (SATs). The whole project lasted about six weeks and between sixty children they had managed to raise an incredible £4000.

What I had realised through this project was that outside the school gates is a whole community of people who have expertise and experiences which are invaluable to schools. The expertise in nursing, bereavement counselling and hard-nosed no-holds-barred fundraising are ones which teachers would never be able to deliver and nor should they. The advantage of this approach is that you are doing something with a genuine purpose and therefore developing a real sense of caring both of the political 'why does it have to be this way' type and of the personal empathy and caring for other human beings type.

Project 2. Rare Plants on the Beach

I then moved to Year 5 and started to look around for a similar project, or at least one which would have all the right ingredients: 1. Something that needs doing in your local community; 2. Some expertise which can be called upon.

We live near to the beach and on the beach, as I found out through my local paper, are some rare plants, so rare in fact that they only grow in three places in the world. After a few phone calls I discovered that the local council have a whole department of experts whose job it is to protect local environments, beaches, woods, ponds and rivers. They also have a job of educating the public and forming volunteering groups.

It seemed perfectly obvious to me that we had two halves of a whole. They had exactly what we needed and we could help them do their job. I spent some time working with their beach warden, who agreed to come into class. We did much the same thing and had an unscripted interview. The children were keen to help so we visited the beach, cleaned it up, collected data and got to find out a lot about the micro environment of these plants and how they survived. We were also given some rare seeds to propagate back at school and joined the Marine Conservation Society. The children's immediate conclusions were that there needed to be an information board at the beach and more bins for people to put their rubbish in. These are both things the conservationists were trying to do anyway, but by getting children involved at an early stage it raised awareness with local people and has since gained a much higher profile in the community. We now go to the beach once a term and support the work of the Marine Conservation Society as well as have a bit of fun building sand sculptures in the summer term.

As an extension to this project, we involved members of the local secondary school, who now run a parallel project and visit the beach with us. They study it from an environmental perspective and at the end of last year our Year 5s went to the local secondary school and the children made presentations to each other. They also kindly set up some shared science experiments which they did together. It involved collecting gases and then setting fire to them, which you can imagine went down very well with our Year 5s.

Again we had managed to do something which the children cared about but which also involved using the expertise in the community to form a partnership. From the council's point of view they were reaching a much wider audience and one which may have far longer-lasting effects. They were also getting expert guidance of how to make presentations interesting from the teachers and the teachers were learning more about the scientific subject. Everybody gains!

Project 3. Shopmobility

The final project I will mention is one we wanted to do in Year 4. Through my work as an Advanced Skills Teacher I try as much as possible to get in contact with a wider network. In this I met someone who was working for Shopmobility. He was working on a project called 'enable me', which was intended to work with schools.

Yet again, here was a local issue which needed support and which had a wealth of experiences and expertise. Shopmobility had a brief to raise funds for

their shops and communicate to the wider community a sense of empathy and understanding. They had traditionally done this through their shops and generally to older people. In working with them I helped them to refine their approach so it would work with our Year 4s. I was able to give them guidance and insight into how schools worked and make it easier for them to have an impact in their approach. The project was initiated through a visit to the school with their team, which included someone who was disabled. Again the children showed a high degree of curiosity and respect and during the day tried out wheelchairs and vision-impairing goggles. They went on to organise sponsored events and learn from practical approaches what disability really means.

Shopmobility had educated a wide, long-lasting audience and raised some money, and the children had learned something about the nature of disability and grown further a sense of care for others. The teachers had also been given a ready-made project which inspired their children and in exchange the experts from Shopmobility had gained in their presentation skills.

I am now working on the idea of an intergenerational project.

It is Only through Really Talking to Someone that You Begin to Care

If you have read this far I hope that you have found it useful. I personally have found that through these approaches I have tended to see myself mainly as a guide-organiser, bringing together people whose needs and wants match each other. Not all experts in the community feel comfortable with standing up in front of children, but given the right support and encouragement it often makes for a more genuine meeting of minds. The tendency is to script it so they don't run out of things to say, because they don't think children will be interested. This is a misconception which comes from both sides which is born out of a lack of understanding. This understanding between our generations will only be built up if we can all talk to each other in a genuine dialogue where questions follow answers and answers follow questions. As teachers we have a critical role in ensuring the quality of that dialogue and to develop the art of conversation. It is only through really talking to someone that you begin to care.

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