

BUT091281 Community Engagement and Transformational Education

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ABSTRACT

In working with people and communities, education is a major force for bringing about positive transformations. There are many reasons why this is so. Education means knowledge, skills, intellectual stimulation, social interaction, and entertainment. Along with these more specific benefits, it is argued that increased hope is a general, underlying benefit of education, and one that is especially relevant to the community engagement mission. When educational initiatives help to create more hopeful communities, community members can benefit in ways that stretch far beyond the positive outcomes typically associated with education. Enhanced hope in the educational sphere translates into broader increases in hope throughout one's entire life. This paper gives examples of community engagement and transformative educational experiences that aim to empower people and communities who have experienced disadvantage, and, in the process, to increase their levels of hope. It is argued that education is a key process in any effort to engage with communities, not only because of its specific benefits, but because it builds and promotes hope.

Introduction

Disadvantage and marginalisation present a major challenge to Australian communities (see Vinson, 2004, 2007), and education plays a key role in efforts to address this challenge (Gillard, 2008; Hayes, Gray, & Edwards, 2008). In recent years, *community engagement* has emerged as a major priority for many educational institutions. These institutions have come to realise the mutual benefits that stem from educational initiatives delivered in partnership with communities and community organisations. Inter-institutional partnerships, such as those between schools and universities, have also promoted community engagement nationally and internationally. Nationally, one example is The Smith Family's 'Learning for Life' education programs for disadvantaged children. The Smith Family's guiding principles in these and other programs include being 'embedded in the community' and working to 'build the community's capacity' (see The Smith Family website, On-line). An international example is the publication 'Universities and Community Schools', whose purpose is to provide a global forum in which academics and practitioners may discuss how to develop and enhance university-school connections in the community. As Benson and Harkavy (2002) pointed out, the publication emerged from a vision of "genuinely collaborative, mutually beneficial partnerships among communities, higher educational institutions...and public schools" (p. 3).

In the present paper, it is argued that, in addition to the many specific benefits that result from community-focused educational initiatives, there is a broader, underlying benefit in the form of increased *hope*. Hope empowers people to pursue their goals successfully, and when education takes place in the context of genuine engagement and mutually beneficial partnerships, its ability to foster hope is maximised. This type of education is truly *transformational*, and the present paper discusses a variety of programs and initiatives that embody the spirit of transformational education and that, as a result, elevate levels of hope throughout communities.

Engagement versus Service; Transaction versus Transformation

In community-based initiatives, there is a growing movement away from old models of community service and toward models of community engagement. The recent creation of the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (begun in the year 2002) evidences this trend. In the educational sphere, there is a movement away from transactional education and toward transformational education. The two trends share an underlying philosophy of collaboration, partnership, inclusion, participation, reciprocity, and empowerment. They also very likely stem from a common source: the widespread realisation of the need for more humanising and respectful ways of working with students, colleagues, and community members.

Traditionally, efforts to address community disadvantage were transactional in nature, with community members as passive recipients of welfare, assistance, or other such aid (Butcher, Egan, & Ralph, 2008; Egan et al., 2006). Hence the term 'community service', implying a one-way relationship whereby powerful parties provide services to those in need, with little consideration of mutuality or engagement. The recent Federal government intervention in Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory is an example of a transactional behaviour. As Carmen Lawrence pointed out in her speech at the inaugural Dhungalla Kaella Oration Series event: "many Indigenous people are now so accustomed to having things done to them and for them, rather than being active participants, that they have lost their sense of mastery, competence and self respect" (see Reconciliation News, 2009). Lawrence argued the intervention ought to be delivered in *partnership* with Aboriginal community members, in order to enhance Indigenous

Australians' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sense of social responsibility. In an address to the Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council Conference, McMullen (2009) also argued that efforts to address Indigenous disadvantage need to be based on trust and partnerships, pointing out that they will not work when "all the power resides with one party only... There has to be a willingness by both parties to listen carefully, not merely a litany of orders barked by one party only."

Nowadays, there is an increasing emphasis on community engagement, implying a two-way, reciprocal relationship whereby disadvantaged community members assume a far more active role and are encouraged to participate in the construction and implementation of community projects. This form of community interaction is far more empowering to community members, because when they feel that they are active agents in the process of overcoming disadvantage, their sense self-efficacy, confidence, and hope are enhanced, which in turn leads to further benefits (Egan et al., 2006). And the benefits are mutual: not only do community members have the opportunity to overcome disadvantage, but the community organisations that facilitate these opportunities benefit from the input and feedback provided by community members. For example, if a university delivered a community project, its efforts to construct, implement, and evaluate the project would be greatly improved by working with community members on the basis of mutual respect, reciprocity, and equal power. A project informed by the community will be more likely to work well within that community, and when community members feel empowered and respected they will be more likely to participate in data-gathering efforts aimed at evaluating the project and its impact on the community (Butcher et al., 2008). More participation from community members means better data for university researchers to analyse, which in turn means better, more compelling publications and more recognition and funding opportunities for the researchers and their universities.

Similarly, in the education sphere there is a growing emphasis on partnerships and community involvement (Butcher et al., 2008), on engaging all students, particularly those who are disadvantaged, in the education process. The benefit of this new, transformational model is that participants in education are more likely to feel empowered, and thus to have more success, when they feel that they are included, and that their voices are being heard. And educational institutions will construct better programs, implement them more easily, and evaluate them more successfully when they collaborate with learners, incorporate their perspectives, and respect what they have to offer. The Federal Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, has also emphasised the need for greater empowerment and equity in education, suggesting that the benefits of transformational models of education may be receiving some acknowledgement at the level of government (see Gillard, 2008). Furthermore, the fact that Gillard is also the Minister for Social Inclusion perhaps speaks to the importance of engagement and inclusion in educational initiatives (see also Hayes et al., 2008).

When educators seek to address disadvantage in the community, they have the opportunity to work with community members to create transformational education programs within the framework of authentic community engagement. The shared philosophy of engagement, reciprocity, and transformational education allows such programs to be highly empowering to community members. Because an engaging, transformational community program is more likely to be successful, participating educators feel empowered too, because they see that their efforts have made a real difference. But how should we understand this sense

of empowerment, and how exactly does it stem from transformational community partnerships? It is argued that the answer to these questions lies in the theory of hope.

Hope Theory

Hope Theory emerged from the positive psychology movement that saw a shift in emphasis away from human pathology and toward human strength and flourishing. In psychological science, hope is understood as goal-directed thinking, with higher levels of hope leading people to set themselves more realistic, attainable, and substantial goals, and to pursue their goals more effectively (Snyder, 2002). According to Hope Theory, there are two key components of hope: *pathways* and *agency*.

'Pathways thinking' refers to one's perception of the available routes by which one might reach a given goal (Snyder, 1995). Higher levels of pathways thinking enable people to identify (a) a greater number of plausible routes to their goals; (b) the most effective routes; and (c) new, better, or alternative routes when the original pathways to their goals become obstructed or when no pathways are originally available. When people perceive that there are no effective routes by which to reach their goals, their sense of hope is lessened, and when they perceive there to be many effective routes, their hope is increased. This has implications for community-based educational initiatives, which often provide pathways by which community members can experience greater social inclusion and can participate more in education and employment. Hope gives people the power to say 'yes' to what is possible in their lives.

'Agency thinking' refers to one's perceived capacity to follow the available pathways leading to one's goals (Snyder, 1995). Higher levels of agency thinking enable people better to motivate themselves to pursue their goals, and to appraise their abilities in a more positive way. When people believe that they do not have the capacity to follow the pathways leading to their goals, and when they are not motivated to follow these pathways, their sense of hope is diminished. But when they believe in their capacities and are motivated to pursue their goals, their hope is increased. Again, there are implications for community-based educational initiatives: they seek to empower community members by providing educational opportunities, and when people are empowered they are more likely to see themselves as capable, competent agents; their agency thinking is likely to be enhanced.

The pathways and agency components of hope are mutually reinforcing (Snyder, 2002). When a goal seems to be out of reach, one feels incompetent and powerless; one feels hopeless. But when a goal seems to be attainable, one feels energised and capable, one feels hopeful. When one feels incompetent and powerless, one's goals seem unattainable; one feels hopeless. But when one feels motivated and empowered, one's goals seem attainable; one feels hopeful. Simply put, it is much easier to motivate oneself to pursue a goal when many workable pathways are available, and it is much easier to identify such pathways when one is motivated to do so. This mutuality should be borne in mind when community initiatives are considered, because these initiatives have the potential to create positive feedback loops in their respective communities. For example, if an initiative were to offer educational pathways to disadvantaged community members, these community members would very likely experience a concomitant boost to their sense of agency, which in turn could motivate them to pursue other goals in their lives, goals that stretch beyond the scope of the original community initiative. In this way, an initiative can have a positive impact on a community that goes beyond its stated aims and targets, and, by virtue of the positive feedback, this impact can continue to be felt in the community long

after the initiative has finished. The next section reviews evidence of how community-based education – particularly when delivered in a transformational way – can lead to increased hope and thereby to a host of benefits and opportunities for the community.

Education as a Source of Hope in the Community

The field of community engagement research is nascent, and so the knowledge base surrounding it is relatively small. As such, there is much work to be done before we will be able to have a comprehensive understanding of community engagement, let alone of how it and hope can be fostered through education. That said, it is still possible to build a robust case for education as a source of hope within community initiatives, by identifying the links that can be made between research findings in the three fields of community engagement, education, and hope.

To the present authors' knowledge, Egan, Butcher, and Ralph (2008) were the first to make an explicit connection between community engagement and hope theory. In their paper, they reviewed the theoretical and empirical evidence indicating that community engagement is fundamentally hope-enhancing. Egan et al. (2008) discussed three transformational education initiatives, all involving Australian Catholic University (ACU), that were especially revealing of the links between community engagement, hope, and transformational education. The first initiative was a collaboration between ACU and the Instituto Católico para Formação de Professores (ICFP; formerly the Catholic Teachers College) in Baucau, East Timor. The partnership between ACU and ICFP was created to provide teacher education courses for East Timorese students teachers, in order to contribute to East Timor's post-independence development. Presently, ACU's Institute for Advancing Community Engagement (IACE) is working with ICFP to continue this capacity-building engagement. Increases in hope have been evident throughout ICFP's collaborations with both ACU and IACE (Egan et al., 2008).

The second initiative discussed by Egan et al. (2008) was a teacher education program for Indigenous Australian students, which was observed to enhance the students' level of hope in numerous ways. The program allowed Indigenous students to complete an Associate Diploma in Aboriginal Education before beginning a Bachelor of Teaching degree. In other words, the initiative provided a subgoal – the Associate Diploma – to allow the aspiring student teachers to have an early experience of goal attainment. Having experienced this early success, the students were more hopeful about the prospect of completing the subsequent Bachelor degree. The program also allowed the students to stay connected to their elders and their communities, thereby giving them an educational pathway that was not previously available to them. By making new pathways accessible to students, the teacher education program promoted pathways thinking and, in the process, overall hope.

The third initiative discussed by Egan et al. (2008) was a community-based tertiary education program for disadvantaged adults. This program, known as 'Catalyst-Clemente', was aimed at re-engaging people who had become marginalised as a result of homelessness, poverty, illness, or other forms of disadvantage. Howard et al. (2008) carried out a comprehensive evaluation of the program at three sites (two in Sydney, one in Brisbane). The evaluation consisted of three phases of data collection, whereby qualitative data was gathered through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. Key themes were identified from this data, one of which was labelled 'The Future'. While Howard et al. (2008) did not describe this theme from the framework of Hope Theory, it is clear from their analysis that the Catalyst-Clemente

participants experienced increases in hope as a result of their experiences within the program (Egan et al., 2008). As they engaged in their studies, the students became better able to articulate their goals, and they expressed a greater sense of agency and opportunity (pathways). This study provides probably the strongest and most direct evidence of how education can promote hope in the community, and as Catalyst-Clemente and other such programs continue to deliver education to community members, we expect additional evidence to emerge in support of our thesis that hope is a key outcome of these initiatives.

The studies just discussed represent the pioneering research into the nexus of community engagement, hope, and transformational education. Outside of this work, there are few studies that provide even tenuous evidence of the interrelation of these three areas of scholarship. This is not because the three areas are unrelated, and it is not because they are unworthy of study. Rather, researchers are only just beginning – relatively speaking – to investigate each area on its own, let alone in conjunction with the other two. The remainder of this literature review will draw upon the best available evidence further to strengthen the case for studying community engagement, hope, and transformational education in one another's terms. And while the following evidence is nowhere near as compelling as that provided by Egan et al. (2008) and Howard et al. (2008), it should provide additional reasons to believe that the present course of inquiry is worthy of further pursuit.

In an extensive study of lifelong learning, Hammond (2004) conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 145 adults on their experiences of learning throughout their lives, and on the meaning of these experiences. Twelve group interviews were also carried out with teachers and other educational practitioners. Analyses of the interview transcripts provided firm evidence that learning can lead to better mental and physical health, greater levels of wellbeing, and more effective coping in the face of stressors. The relationship of lifelong learning to these benefits was found to be mediated by five groups of psychosocial factors, one of which was 'purpose and hope'. In other words, Hammond (2004) found that education makes a positive impact on people's lives partly because it enhances their sense of hope. Disadvantaged communities often experience lower levels of health and wellbeing, and as such they stand to gain immensely from educational initiatives. And, given that Hammond (2004) found learning to be beneficial throughout the lifespan, community members of all ages could be expected to enjoy increased levels of hope and – as a result – improved health and wellbeing, if they were to participate in educational initiatives in their communities.

Drawing on psychological, neurological, and evolutionary research, Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal (2006) investigated the roles of fear and hope in the lives of people and their communities. They concluded that "although fear functions as an important adaptive mechanism it also may play a detrimental role in various individual and collective situations, especially when hope is needed for changing a situation that causes misery" (p. 381). Thus, promoting hope can facilitate efforts to address community disadvantage, and Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal (2006) suggested that hope can be enhanced through reflective thinking and reflective evaluation, processes that are developed through participating in transformational education. Education and socialisation were identified as key ways in which to promote the development of the personal capacities needed for overcoming the fearful responses that inhibit hopeful thinking. To encourage a greater orientation towards hope in society, Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal (2006) recommended that hope-focused belief systems ought to be communicated within communities by educational institutions and other influential institutions. The process of community engagement forges a bridge between

communities and educational institutions, and as such is an ideal channel by which to transmit hopeful messages and hope-enhancing interactions.

Estola (2003) examined the concept of hope within teacher education courses in Finland. She examined the autobiographical accounts of both student teachers and fully qualified teachers, with a focus on the theme of hope. The study began with the view that hope involves an orientation towards the future, which echoes Hope Theory's conception of hope as goal-centred. After qualitatively analysing the students' and teachers' stories, Estola (2003) concluded that "Hope gives one the reason to try to do one's best" (p. 199); the motivating power of hope (agency thinking) was evident in the analysed narratives. The student teachers' accounts revealed the power of education to instil a greater sense of hope, to "help students to make their hope flourish" (p. 199), and to help students "accept both the highlights and predicaments of teaching while still...retaining a sense of hope" (p. 200). Being able to face both the good (goal fulfilment) and the bad (obstacles to one's goals) is a key characteristic of hopeful people. Estola's (2003) research also pointed to the power of education to act as a moral process aimed at making a difference. Citing Hansen's (1998) perspective on teaching as a 'moral enterprise', Estola described education as "a future-oriented practice aiming at the promotion of a flourishing life" (p. 183). In this view, we recognise the capacity of education not only to promote hope, but also to enhance the lives of those who participate in it. This is truly the aim of education-focused community engagement programs.

You et al. (2008) investigated hope in the context of school connectedness. School connectedness is a construct that pertains to students' sense of the quality of their relationships with their peers and teachers at school. School connectedness is similar to community engagement, in that those community members who are more engaged perceive themselves to have stronger ties to the community, and are more likely to belong to supportive social networks (Egan et al., 2006). While community engagement is a broader and wider-reaching concept than that of school connectedness, You et al.'s (2008) study gives some indication as to how hope might play a role in educational contexts that go beyond the school environment. You et al. found that, for non-bullied students, higher levels of school connectedness predicted greater life satisfaction, via increased levels of hope. In other words, there was evidence that greater connectedness leads to higher hope, which in turn leads to greater life satisfaction. Bullied students, unfortunately, were found to have lower levels of hope and connectedness, which predicted lower life satisfaction. Encouraging greater school connectedness could be an effective way in which to increase levels of hope, and thereby enhance students' life satisfaction, provided the issue of bullying is addressed. In the same way, encouraging community engagement through educational initiatives could facilitate increases in hope, which in turn could lead to additional positive outcomes for community members and for those with whom they collaborate. And, just as the issue of bullying must be addressed in students before they can benefit from increased connectedness, it is likely that equivalent issues (e.g., community violence, ill health, poverty, crime) will need to be addressed in disadvantaged communities in order for them fully to benefit from educational programs aimed at promoting greater engagement.

Conclusion

While there remains much to be discovered about community engagement and transformational education, the evidence currently available is highly promising with regard to the role that hope plays in this process. When educational institutions engage with the

community in mutually beneficial partnerships centred on transformational education, we believe that increases in hope are likely to occur, which in turn allow all involved to pursue their goals in more effective ways. To become more hopeful is to become more empowered, and to become more empowered is to become better able to escape the cycles of disadvantage that affect many communities nationally and internationally. Of course, a sustained commitment is needed on the part of those involved in transformational education; when tackling the issues of disadvantage and marginalisation, no gains are likely to come easily. As such, additional evidence is needed in order to make transformational education initiatives as successful as possible. Future research into these initiatives should explicitly investigate the possibility that they promote increases in hope, and that these increases in turn facilitate other positive outcomes. Such a research agenda, combined with a dedication to delivering the initiatives with a genuine focus on partnerships and reciprocity, could very likely advance our understanding of community-based education far beyond its present state. That is our hope.

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