



## Essay from the Developers

### Full-Circle Learning: An Integrated Approach to Fostering Future Leaders

Children do not need to inherit the problems of the world we leave behind. They can start now to create a better world. A new movement afoot, called *full-circle learning*, builds their capacity and motivation as change agents. It does so by shaping the passions that begin in the heart, captivate the mind and engage human energies. The most successful students, in our experience, are those who not only feel skillful or curious or creative or who find intrinsic joy in learning for its own sake. The most successful students tend to combine these instincts with an awareness of the connection between their own unique capacities and the positive world conditions they are helping to foster or the suffering they are helping to ameliorate.

What do you wish for today's children and youth? What do you wish for the future of education? Try to imagine an enrichment setting in which students find a purpose for learning—one that nurtures their sense of compassion and urges them to discover fulfillment in giving back to society. Imagine programs that help each student cultivate his or her own gifts and carve out a unique role in forwarding an ever-advancing civilization, based on high ethical standards and altruism.

It is not a new dream but perhaps one that requires more deliberate efforts than ever to pursue. Cesar Chavez said that the goal of all education is service to humanity. We often think of that goal in terms of the here and now, letting each generation fend for itself. Fred Baufman noted, in an essay called *Legacies*, that "If America and the world are to thrive in the year 2050...we must become the first generation in human history to love our more distant descendants in the same way that we love our children and grandchildren." (Williamson, Marianne, *Imagine: What America Could Be in the 21st Century*. New American Library, New York, 2000). Baufman noted that we are the first generation of humans to so desperately need this capacity, because we can "manipulate the biosphere without and the gene within."

The hope that this dream is possible lies in the fact that we are also enjoying a renaissance in human history for our ability to bring people together to address the needs of a global humanity, partially through instant community organizing via the Internet. As the sociological and educational advances of humanity align with its technological advances, we can create a world in harmony on many levels, yet we can only create and sustain such a world by imbuing the next generation with a great deal of humanity, compassion and other-directedness, and with the desire to contribute to such a world through their work, their interpersonal relationships and through their involvement in local and global communities. The internet cannot tap into these innate human virtues unless human communities (some combination of families, schools, and community groups) have presented models that help children feel a sense of humanity and connect with it.

As the assessment-based demands on public education become greater and the budgetary constraints tighter, after-school programs in many states are uniquely poised to embrace and advance this goal. In fact, in many districts, schools are locked in a pattern of struggling for dollars, scrambling for assessment results and trying to provide consistent training without the means to do so. Until the priorities can be adjusted so that all that the experts know about

learning can be practically applied to education, community-based enrichment programs may need to play a greater role in filling in the gap. Charter schools and innovative public educators and also play a vital role.

If we want students to grow into the kind of community leaders needed in a society becoming increasingly global, we cannot expect them to intuit the opportunities the world has to offer them. We need to present a global orientation over a self-focused universe during their formative years, when even brief life experiences can create such memorable impressions and the sense of connection to nature can still provoke awe and relief of the suffering of another human being can create surprise as well as deep resonance. When these emotions are connected with learning the arts and sciences and technical skills such as math, integrated learning provides meaning- making activity on several levels.

Some learning environments foist so many survival issues on children that the schools tend to encourage competition, aggression or a sense of futility instead of a sense of collaboration for the common good. Other schools may provide safety, yet the emphasis on assessments helps students know only what and not why they are expected to learn. Sometimes we are pretty good at teaching them how to learn. But do we teach them why to learn? Do they see the connection between the personal attributes and skills they develop and the world they are creating—even now, as children? The purpose of this new movement, full-circle learning, is to help children embrace their role as society's helpers and healers now and to work toward their future role as enlightened, socially responsible leaders, whether in their families, their workplaces, their communities or the world. One way to do this is to influence both attitude and aptitude simultaneously, whether the progress is administered by a public school, a private school, a non-profit or non-governmental organization, a faith group, a city government or a home school.

## **Why Make Personal Development Deliberate?**

Why is it essential to introduce a global ethic into education? Will it interfere with preserving cultural identity? At a recent Global Connections conference sponsored by Plan International, 12-16 year-old students from 20 countries came together to share their perspectives about local and global issues around the world—especially issues affecting children and youth. Each brought a unique perspective based on culture and custom, but all brought a collective commitment to act participate in changing life for children who suffer. They were made stronger by coming together to realize that both the problems and the desire to change them were not unique to their culture.

If children automatically absorb the expectations of their society, what messages does your community send? A study called *Hardwired to Connect*, completed by a team of physicians and scientists in December of 2003, indicates that the increase in attention deficit, depression, suicide and aggressive behaviors in children and youth results from a biological need to connect with adult role models in supportive communities that present consistent messages about values and ethics.

Those of us of a certain vintage remember a time in America when the commonwealth itself supported dedication to the commonwealth. The few movies and television programs we saw reinforced the values we learned at home, which supported those taught in the religious community, at school and even in our neighborhoods. When a neighbor called our home one day, and my brother answered, "Hike!" instead of "hello," she knew he had been playing

football in the house and reported it to my mother. That was because most people in the neighborhood had similar standards for behavior and similar definitions of integrity. No one was allowed to play football in the house. Today, another parent might feel reticent to comment on the child's behavior, not knowing whether the family standards differed from one home to another. In many homes, the students probably wouldn't be playing football at all but, rather, watching video games or television with no parent present in the room to discuss, evaluate or contextualize the content.

Mary Pipher's legendary book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. (Ballantine Books; New York, 1994; p. 291) cites UCLA studies done at the Annenberg School of Communication, as well as the American Psychological Association, which demonstrated the considerable influence of media on attitudes and behaviors. Everything from antisocial behavior, gender stereotyping and diabetes to bad grades has been linked to the excessive or unsupervised television viewing habits of youth. It's no surprise. If this were not so, advertisers would not have invested such a high ratio of their earnings toward influencing the thought processes, emotions and ultimately, the behaviors of buyers over the course of a century.

More relaxed standards in the media are not the only thing that has made it difficult for youth to understand what society expects of them. While there was no shortage of hypocrisy, prejudice and oppression in the old-world society, children generally knew what messages to expect about the goals they could either aspire to or not aspire to. They heard consistent, accepted cultural narratives.

Today, we live in a more transient world. Children are immersed in classrooms with a rich level of diversity, and yet the differences in family standards and cultural traditions present more complexity for them. A psychologist recently observed that recent student immigrants to America do not maintain the high level of success they once did. He described how children of immigrant families once excelled in school for multiple generations. In recent years, he said, the children find a shocking disparity between the idealism that led them to come and the reality they find in American classrooms where students don't respect adults and home settings in which students have too little responsibility, too little supervision and too much access to disrespectful role models on television or on the streets. Peers might even make fun of the immigrants' working-class parents and dissuade the children from the life of hard work and communal caring fostered by their own former cultural narratives. (In one school, the chant at the high school football game from one team to another was "your mother are our maids.") Consequently, within two years, the immigrant students' grades in one study dropped to the level of their American peers, according to the researcher. He opined that an unrealistic idealism and trust in adults is actually much more productive than cynicism and a sense of entitlement as an influence on achievement. The students he met felt robbed of their most idealistic and hopeful reality and, therefore, stopped living up to their own potential.

The complexity of today's society, coupled with the diverse philosophies gleaned through television, movies and video games and in varying social circles outside the home, require children to develop a much stronger capacity for self-selection than they may be capable of at young age. Children must sort out these mixed messages and decide how to live meaningful lives. At the same time, regardless of language proficiency, turbulent changes, media messages, class factors ranging from nutrition issues to dysfunctional indulgence, students are held to high standards of academic achievement, sometimes without a discussion of why solving a math problem today will make a difference in their happiness tomorrow.

The legal debate about when to try a youth as an adult in a court of law has revealed that at any given age, young people have varying capacities to discern the long-term consequences of their choices. Yet those of us who have worked in after-school settings with certain elements in place have seen students cultivate this determination at an early age. We have seen them

make that connection between the skills and attributes they learn today and the accountability, other-directedness and pursuit of excellence they will apply in their adult lives. We have seen children with few role models for positive, crime-free social behavior begin to set personal goals to acquire law degrees or medical degrees, and we have seen them do this independently by the end of their fifth grade year, then give speeches about their goals. The ideas and personal development spawned by their learning have opened windows for them to see how they might apply their future skills in compassionate service. We have observed homeless students living in horrendous social environments, who had never heard of the Peace Corps, yet who eagerly absorbed the full-circle learning lessons and made decisions to earn college degrees so they could join the Peace Corps. When the act of striving for high ideals and social skills becomes deliberate and when those ideals are linked to the development of academic and artistic capacities, students feel a greater motivation to learn. We have seen this phenomenon bear out time and time again. Independent academic assessments have repeatedly shown that at least three out of every four students enrolled in a full-circle learning after-school program increase their grade equivalency in the basic content areas. More than half of those tested who remained in the program for two years or longer increased their grade equivalency by multiple grade levels. Parent surveys also indicate that students universally improve their social skills, ability to resolve conflicts, their global awareness and motivation to learn, as well as developing new academic skills. Public school teachers also report that the program builds leadership skills and accountability.

Humboldt State University's sociology department has an ongoing study on ways to encourage altruism in society. Sam and Pearl Oliner, in the book *Toward a Caring Society*, (Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1995; p. 202), noted that a caring work or school environment helps its members empathize with others by encouraging them to first know themselves—exploring their own thoughts and feelings—and to simultaneously understand others' perspectives and needs through appropriate questioning, role playing and simulations." It goes on to say that "...success in these endeavors depends on conditions conducive to trust building... Empathy would not preclude high expectations of others but instead lead to realistic expectations based on understanding rather than arbitrary determinations."

We do live in a more complex world today than ever before. We need deliberate programs that foster understanding at the critical ages when human beings are indeed getting to know themselves. Anthropologist Riane Eisler is an advocate of systems that promote partnership instead of domination. She wrote *Tomorrow's Children* (Westview Press; Boulder, Colorado 2000; p. 25) to describe ways to reshape contemporary educational models, emphasizing that, "We must have the courage to...become the architects of a partnership future for generations to come through an enlightened, empathic global public education. Adapted for different regions and cultures, partnership education can be a blueprint, for refocusing, reframing and redesigning education to help all children realize their full humanity..." How does full-circle learning attempt to create such an environment? I will refer once more to an expert on the changing world for today's children. Mary Pipher, on page 250 of *Reviving Ophelia*, maintained that many young people come to therapists with "problem-saturated stories." She discussed the wisdom of playing a unique role "to help them tell more powerful and optimistic stories about themselves...to create solution talk instead of problem talk." This is the goal of full-circle learning. The stories student begin to tell about their lives can be powerful, optimistic and true. Full-circle learning seeks to help students not only learn positive habits-of-heart, as we call them, but to develop altruistic identities and carve out personal visions that will lead to lives of achievement in service to humanity.

George Eliot insists, in the closing chapter of *Middlemarch*, that anonymity does not preclude leadership in shaping the future, "...for the fact that things are so well with you and I is half-

owing to the lives of those whose names are forgotten and who rest in unvisited tombs." Service then, by definition, is leadership. Full-Circle Learning students learn the motto, "To lead is so serve; to serve is to lead." To expand one's personal capacity in service to others doubles the sense of creative fulfillment as it amplifies the leader's purpose.

Do you ever wonder how most Nobel winners spent their spare time in childhood? At some point, mentors provided them with the tools that gave birth to a vision. The tools were probably not unearned praise or shallow encouragement but, more likely, a new life experience, a shared concept, a high expectation or a demonstrated need. Imagine the peace treaties that may never have been signed, the pandemics that may never have been thwarted, the ideas that may never have found its way onto a page or into a culture and the events that may never have found their way into a chapter of history if, at some point, human imagination and higher inspiration had not converged in the lives of inspired leaders. How will we mentor the next generation of leaders? How will we provide the experiences that not only kindle their minds but put new sparkle in their eyes and plant passion in their hearts? Fortunately, the practical tools can be much simpler than the ultimate visions they inspire. We invite you to sharpen these tools and add Full-Circle Learning to whatever services you currently offer the future leaders in your midst.

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## **FULL-CIRCLE LEARNING**

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