Many of the issues we face today can be traced to the compartmentalization of subjects and disciplines, and the resulting blindness to the effects our actions have on other living systems. Management theories based on deterministic models of human and ecosystem behaviour have also failed us. It is time to replace them. Likewise, treating students as units to be sorted and graded according to their likelihood of success at university may have been appropriate for an era when 90 percent of students were expected to enter the workforce before completing high school, but is of little value in today’s diverse classrooms. As Einstein put it, “we can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking that created them.” The challenges at hand call for an education system that is inclusive, that emphasizes civic engagement, and that develops the skills necessary to work effectively across disciplines and cultures, in the places we call communities. The question is, where do we find the ideas and the leadership that can bring about this substantial and vital shift?

Recognizing the Voluntary Education Sector

Many new ideas arise at the borders of systems. Academics and educators engage in research and reform of the education system itself, but much that is innovative in today’s schools originates outside the classroom, in a burgeoning set of programs and partnerships with the voluntary or community sector, and in the relationships being established by bridge builders who connect schools to communities.
A recent study notes that, depending upon how they are classified, between 8,000 and 13,000 federally registered charitable organizations now include education in their mandates. Whether as an expression of public interest, or as evidence of transformation in progress, it is significant that – without formal recognition or coordination – a voluntary education sector has emerged to complement and challenge public education. Leading initiatives have appeared in traditional domains like Canadian history (Historica) and mathematics (JUMP Math), and in emergent fields such as arts-integrated learning (ArtsSmarts, Learning Through the Arts), emotional intelligence (Roots of Empathy), and sustainability education (Evergreen Foundation, Les Etablissements Verts Brundtland).

Innovative school/community partnerships like those cited – and many more that exist at a provincial or local level – constitute a critical investment in social resilience. However, while some voluntary sector programs have become well known, few educators or voluntary sector practitioners are aware of the size of the ‘intertidal zone’ between the public education and voluntary sectors, of the diversity of initiatives that have emerged, or of their potential to change both schools and communities for the better.
The successful JUMP Math program, for example, works on the premise that if every student is supported in mastering the topic under study, each then has the background knowledge needed to tackle further work. Instead of testing to categorize students as winners and losers, truly inclusive classrooms become possible and teachers’ work more manageable and more satisfying. As a charitable organization, JUMP is able to attract an enthusiastic cohort of university students who volunteer as classroom aides and tutors. On the other hand, it must occasionally contend with opposition from educators and publishers committed to the status quo. Despite this, it continues to attract new adherents, in Canada, the US and the UK.

Marzano points out that mentoring relationships where community members provide ongoing support to individual students add to every student’s store of background knowledge. In another example, Roots of Empathy introduces a parent and a baby into the classroom, giving everyone an opportunity to participate in attentive care. Marzano adds: “By definition, a direct approach [to acquiring background knowledge also] means increasing the variety and depth of out-of-class experiences such as field trips to museums and art galleries or school-sponsored travel and exchange programs.”

The ArtsSmarts program, which involves students in the creation of work that integrates personal perspectives with the theme under study, operates as a partnership between schools and local arts groups. The frequency with which teachers and students in such programs report a deepened engagement in learning suggests that it may be helpful to replace with an intentionally diverse range of community-based or community-related experiences. This kind of engagement can be an effective counter to high dropout rates, while liberating teachers from “command and control” strategies.

This approach has also been shown to alleviate some of the difficulties faced by aboriginal learners, for whom the long shadow of the residential school system still colours learners’ experience.

Community building also occurs in community service learning programs in which academic course work is conducted under the auspices of school/voluntary sector partnerships. For students, real world experience adds relevance and a sense of making a difference now rather than after a distant graduation date. In turn, youthful energy and enthusiasm can revitalize community organizations. It is worth noting that when they have an opportunity to exercise choice in the matter, post-secondary students are opting for this kind of experiential learning; a service learning movement is emerging on Canadian college and university campuses, involving students and faculty in a wide range of innovative programs.

MacKenzie reports that first semester contact reflects the traditional grandparent/grandchild relationship. During the second example is the Meadows School project in Coldstream, BC. For the past six years, teacher Sharon MacKenzie has moved her (Grade 5, 6 or 7) class into a seniors’ residence for five weeks in the fall semester and three weeks in the spring semester, with bi-weekly cross-over visits for the balance of the school year. Activities integrate inter-generational learning partnerships, core government-mandated curriculum, and community service. Learning outcomes are specific and yet wide-ranging, promoting fundamental human connectedness within a community context.

MacKenzie reports that first semester contact reflects the traditional grandparent/grandchild relationship. During
the second term, students generally take on attributes of caretakers. The seniors show a noticeable improvement in attitude, physical activity levels, and general demeanor. “From an educational point of view, this immersion has created an experiential field for children, fertile in authentic involvement with an older generation,” says MacKenzie.8

As these examples show, change can begin anywhere – in a classroom, a union, or a community.

CONCLUSION

Educators and voluntary sector or community partners are already engaged in the vital process of connecting their respective systems for the benefit of students and communities. This vast undertaking constitutes a vibrant but under-examined field, where much remains to be done. As Ric Young notes in his introduction to Getting to Maybe, “We must learn to be adept at the task of making change. It’s an essential modern competency.”9 For educators, this includes learning about voluntary sector programs and how to work with community partners. Professional development is needed both for teachers, and for voluntary sector practitioners, who could benefit by learning from one another’s successes and failures. Philanthropy has a role to play too – in supporting promising new initiatives and in disseminating the learning that arises from them. There is a particular need for research and policy on school/community learning partnerships. Finally, all of us as citizens – and especially as youth – need to be encouraged to play active roles in imagining and co-creating the schools and the communities we want. The future depends on it!

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Notes
3 Ibid., 136
6 See www.communityservicelearning.ca
7 Michael McGonigle and Justine Starke, Planet U: Sustaining the World, Reinventing the University (Gabriola Island, Canada, 2006), 204.
8 Personal communication. For more information contact meadows-schoolproject@shaw.ca