

The Middlebury Institute of International Studies

A Look At Experiential Education In Preparing High School Students For The Future

Comparative International Education
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Research Question

Is experiential learning at the Watershed School in Boulder, Colorado preparing high school students to be better citizen-workers than Boulder Valley Public School District?

Abstract

The purpose of this paper will be to explore how experiential education can more effectively prepare high school students to be better citizen-workers. This goal is based on the functionalist theory of education that values a more educated and productive citizen worker over other potential reasons for education. Specifically, it will cite examples of what experiential education is, how it is carried out, and the potential benefits to the students as compared to more traditional methods of education in the United States.

Functionalist Theory

“Functionalist arguments portrayed schooling as a response to the needs of modernizing societies, driven by the demands of new forms of economic and political organization as societies move from pre-modern stages of development. Functionalist arguments underlie much of what we hear about schooling in the popular media and political discourse including the idea that schooling produces a more modern and more productive citizen-worker, and thus is essential for economic growth.” (Mundy 2008)

Rationale For Using the Functionalist Theory

I believe that the functionalist viewpoint aligns very well with the rationale behind the creation of innovative schools and experiential education. The idea being that many students are not learning the skills necessary to be productive members of society through traditional education. Experiential education still needs a lot of empirical data to support its claims, however there is a

growing movement toward alternative methods of learning based on parents own experiences within the traditional education system. Joseph P. Farrell writes in chapter five of *Comparative and International Education: Issues for Teachers* that, there have a been a growing number of schools in developing countries that are using emergent and alternative teaching methods and having extraordinary results and are highly efficient (Farrell 2008).

Emergent and experiential learning methods are proving to be highly effective at teaching students about what they are most interested in and in ways that promote creative and critical thought. These are ideals that indeed benefit all of society as we modernize and move into a more diverse economy and society where ideas and creative problem solving begin to overtake manual labor and simple jobs become mechanized. The idea of creating a more educated citizen-worker also fits well with the idea of exploring the world around oneself to learn, rather than through the lens of a book.

Introduction

Experiential education is not a new method of teaching. It is a method of teaching that has existed in many forms for centuries, but only over the past century has it seen an increase in its popularity, legitimacy, and proven effectiveness. Only recently have scholars begun to quantify its benefits and provide the research needed to push the initiative into the mainstream education system. For this paper the Watershed Experiential High School and the Boulder Valley Public School District will be compared and contrasted for the ways in which they prepare their students to be citizen-workers.

I have a special interest in experiential education and its implementation into the mainstream education system because of the impact that it has had on my life. From my first experience at eco-week camping in the forest in 6th grade I was impacted by how much I was able to learn from my natural environment and through having the ability to make-decisions and see first hand the consequences of those decisions. That experience helped to give me self-confidence and make me feel like I could be an agent of change in my life. Since then I have gone on to lead international trips that have been almost entirely field based learning and it has shown me how effective and powerful of a tool experience can be.

Background

The Watershed School is an innovative middle and high school located in Boulder, Colorado USA. The schools mission is to spark adventure and wonder, foster inquiry, and community, and build the character and ability of students to take on the world's greatest challenges. The Watershed School is a private institution that relies on tuition for funding. The average tuition for 2014-15 was \$20,100, however many of the students receive financial aid. They believe that students learn best when they are (watershedschool.org):

- Essential members of a vibrant, diverse learning community
- Immersed in challenging, real-life experiences that make a difference
- Exploring ideas, questions, and projects that are meaningful and relevant to them
- Collaborating with inspiring adults who know them well
- Given real responsibility for their education
- In touch with their innate wisdom and capacity for insight

The Boulder Valley Public School District's vision is to develop our children's greatest abilities and make possible the discovery and pursuit of their dreams which, when fulfilled, will benefit us all. They provide a comprehensive and innovative approach to education and graduate successful, curious, lifelong learners who confidently confront the great challenges of their time.

The Boulder Valley School District receives public funding and charges no fees for attendance.

The mission of the Boulder Valley School District is to create challenging, meaningful and engaging learning opportunities so that all children thrive and are prepared for successful, civically engaged lives. The values of the Boulder Valley School District are (bvsvd.org):

1. We respect the inherent value of each student and incorporate the strengths and diversity of students, family, staff and communities.
2. Societal inequities and unique learning needs will not be barriers to student success.
3. We address the intellectual growth, health and physical development, and social emotional well-being of students.
4. We value accountability and transparency at all levels.

Literature Review

John Dewey (1938) is largely regarded as the “father” of experiential education and proposed that to understand the world, learners need to interact directly with it. Dewey thought that learning should be active (the body and/or mind) and relevant to the student, and followed by a period of reflection as knowledge becomes assimilated, and later applied to future experiences (Shellman, A. 2014). According to the Association for Experiential Education, “Experiential education is a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities.”(2015).

Experiential education programs typically give students several opportunities to set, work toward, and achieve goals, identify and utilize resources, demonstrate initiative, extend and receive support from others assume leadership roles, make decisions, persist at challenges, solve problems, and go beyond perceived limits. These experiential education programs are often used to develop self-confidence, decision-making and problem-solving skills, leadership, self-

efficacy, self-determination, and life-effectiveness through a variety of settings and methods (Shellman, A. 2014).

“Given the increasingly complex world in which we live, and the future challenges we face, our need for a citizenry that feels they possess the resources to respond to current and future challenges, and are willing to do so, is of [the] utmost importance” (Shellman, A. 2014). This idea fits well with the functionalist theory on education that states that the purpose of education is to create a more informed and productive citizen-worker.

The effectiveness of experiential learning as a method of learning is explored in-depth through the lens of neuroscience in Jeb Schenck and Jessie Cruickshank’s research, *Evolving Kolb: Experiential Education in the Age of Neuroscience*. “Emerging neuropsychological evidence demonstrates that certain types of learning involve both the pre-frontal lobes and brain stem activity. Experiential learning integrates different neural networks during the learning event, resulting in multiple memory pathways and connections between abstract concepts through multiple modalities produces higher retention rates” (Schenck, J. k., & Cruickshank, J. 2015). Furthermore, “experiential learning also addresses the students need for an emotive connection to the physical world, which in turn triggers a release of dopamine, significant to memory formation. Experiential learning provides novel experiences, stimulating attention, and limbic/emotional systems, which facilitates memory formation (Gazzaniga et al., 2002). These are incredible findings that offer legitimacy to the field by demonstrating that neuroscience studies have been shown to support what many experiential educators have long thought to be true.

In Claudia Styles paper, *Producing Lifelong Learners Requires Real-Life Applications*, she describes how too often students in traditional U.S. education learn in isolation and are prevented from forming a deep understanding of their own learning (Claudia 2003). Claudia states, “Unfortunately, a conflict exists between advocates of an educational system designed to meet standards that simply produce high test scores and those who support the far-reaching goal of preparing and equipping students with deep understanding and lifelong learning skills needed to be productive citizens” (Claudia 2003). This quote makes reference to how traditional education in the United States often teaches students how to take standardized tests (to receive more public funding) rather than imparting skills, critical thinking, and encouraging lifelong learning. This is a common critique of traditional education and should be taken into consideration when comparing the Boulder Valley School District to the Watershed School.

Case Studies

For the comparison of these two schools teaching methods and content, I looked at the curricula of several classes within the schools and how they are set-up, along with the values and learning outcomes that each school sets out to accomplish. At the Boulder Valley Public schools the curriculum and learning outcomes are all very established and have specific individual lesson plans available online. The lesson plans are very clear and have a specific date for each school subject. For example, the following are course descriptions from each school, one for High School Democracy and Politics at the Watershed School and one for the High School Politics and Problems class in the Boulder Valley School District:

Democracy and Politics

“Essential Question: Why do some people have rights while others do not?

Course Description: This course explores the tenets of democracy and looks at current issues around human and civil rights. Students examine the philosophical underpinnings of our democratic republic and what it means to be a democrat in a republic and a republican in a democracy. What does it mean to be free? To have rights? What does it mean to be denied freedom? To be denied rights? (Watershedschool.org)”

Politics and Problems

“This course is designed to use current events and issues to learn and understand many of the civics standards. Using various methods of research and assessment, students will examine and critique the US government, understand their roles as citizens, and have a better comprehension of the structure and function of the United States government (bvsd.org).”

While I think it is difficult to gain insight into a class without seeing how it is executed, I do see more emphasis on philosophical and critical thought at the Watershed School. In my opinion these descriptions exemplify the similarities of the two schools, rather than highlighting the differences. It seems as though there are several courses that are offered at both schools that look very similar and the differences lie more in the unique courses offered each school.

What seems to set the Watershed School apart from the local public school is the semester long learning expeditions for the students. During these expeditions students learn in various places outside the classroom and are taught to connect with the community and the world in a natural way. These learning expeditions are often several hours a day and relate to the current theme of the class. The learning expeditions emphasize community responsibility, sustainable lifestyles, and commitment to diversity. Another distinct part of Watershed School curriculum is the integration of service learning.

Comparative Analysis

The purpose of this paper was to explore whether the Watershed School better prepares its students to be more productive and more modern citizen-workers. However, due to a lack of post graduation data the comparison becomes less objective. Another large gap in the examination is the differing social status of the two schools students. The Watershed school costs more than \$20,000 a year in tuition and has a very competitive application process and because of this it is difficult to differentiate if the students are being prepared by the school or whether they are reaping the benefits of coming from a higher socioeconomic standpoint.

Related to the last point is the fact that the Watershed School has less diversity because of its exclusiveness and cost. This lack in diversity can be seen a weakness in preparing students for the 'real world' of diverse peoples. I was unable to find demographic data on Watershed School's population, but found that at Boulder High School there were a variety of ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses (bvsd.org).

Another factor that should be considered is the overwhelming evidence that experiential education is an effective model of education. Based on literature review there are significant gains to student learning when students are engaged in an interactive way with their lessons. So despite the fact that the experiential students may lack a diverse student body there is reason to believe that their retention and understanding of the class materials is greater, although it should be noted that there is no current data to support that claim.

Conclusion

While I came into my research with a bias in favor of experiential education and the Watershed School, I can see a large limitation of the program being a lack of diversity due to prohibitive costs. As the world becomes more globalized it will be necessary to have experience working with a variety of different people and it is my conclusion that the Watershed School does connect students with community in a real way, but may not prepare students for a working environment that is more diverse. The Watershed School excels at creating a curriculum that is focused on student learning and participation, inspiring students to follow their passions, and is not restricted by the need to demonstrate standardized test results (Watershedschool.org).

If I had more resources I would like to have interviewed various graduates from both schools to see what their thoughts were about their education and preparedness for the 'real world'. I also would have liked to see more statistical data from both schools about the preparedness and future outcomes of the students. Unfortunately, this post-graduation data does not currently exist.

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