YOUTH INITIATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

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IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Look into a mirror. Do you like what you see? Your answer might depend on what you had for lunch that day or if you had lunch at all; whether or not you got enough sleep last night; or the length of your to-do list that particular day. The truth is that on some days we see ourselves as ugly and weak and on others as dashing and unassailable. Our evaluation of ourselves is often reflexive and emotional, almost thoughtless. But sometimes self-evaluation can lead to true reflection, a meditation on what is important and what is merely sound and fury.

YIHS strives to undertake just this kind of self-evaluation. Our Long Range Planning Committee is engaged in an extensive investigation of the strengths and weaknesses of our institution through conversations with all sections of our corporation. Our faculty undertakes an evaluation of itself through classroom visits by other teachers, peer mentoring, and a formal process for student evaluation of their teachers. The Board of Trustees, the Development Committee and other governance bodies integrate studies of a wide range of literature into their meeting schedules. And we expect the same of our students asking that their conscience and will, not grades or rules, guide their actions.

But sometimes the mirror is not enough. We need an outside observer; "How do I look?" we ask. Youth Initiative has been fortunate through its history to have been observed by academics interested in the ways which grassroots organizations, alternative education, and unique communities interact with one another. These studies have been read by teachers, board members, administrators, parents, and students at YIHS and their perspectives are as valuable as their findings. Read on and find out what they have to say about our little school.

"The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself."

-Henry Miller

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE: PROCESS AS AN END

In the autumn of 2008 a fresh face could be seen in the hallways and offices of Youth Initiative High School. At first many of us thought that we had admitted a new student, but despite her rather youthful appearance our visitor was both erudite and wise. That face belonged to Julia Steege, a young undergraduate working toward a degree in Anthropology who had come to write her honors thesis on the inner workings of our humble little school. The title of her thesis turned out to be Syzygy, *a word that has two diametrically opposed meanings and a metaphor for the value of debate in the education of young people.* Syzygy *has since been studied by our Board of Trustees and read and discussed among faculty and students and can be read in its entirety at our website,* www.yihs.net.

Students learn the art of non-violent communication during YIHS' annual camping trip at the beginning of the school year.

…In other words, giving students, parents, and teachers equal power over and responsibility for their own education creates constant debates and their resulting inefficiencies and disadvantages, but it also means that (in general) YIHS has responded to its people rather than to passively obeying "expert" educational administrators, policy makers, or philosophers of any bent. Though the conflicts will always be messy and people will always argue that teachers, students, parents, and/or individuals are trying to grasp too much power, YIHS has historically been an institution that answers to the people that actually go to it at that moment in history. It responds to its people, because the controversies themselves have forced people to come together to consistently test, challenge, revise, retest, rechallenge, and rerevise their educational ideologies. Indeed when I asked Jacob, YIHS's director and someone who a few think influences the school too much with his strong ideology, to describe his vision for the school's future he responded with a series of questions that YIHS must decide rather than outline his personal vision for the school. These questions included how many students YIHS should ideally enroll; whether or not YIHS should move to a different building and where it should move to; and whether or not YIHS should become a boarding school. Also, frequently when I asked alumni whether they thought the changes that YIHS has gone through since they have graduated are for the better or for the worse, quite a few answered that although they personally would not support the changes they could not evaluate them since they must reflect what the current YIHS community wants. Last, Jacob also mentioned that the people who most help the school to progress by articulating their controversial ideas are often outsiders, because they are less encumbered by a Midwestern sensibility and/or the culture of Viroqua. The past three examples illustrate how debates force YIHS's participants to come together to constantly consider/reconsider the educational repercussions of future choices.

Certainly, not every school can or should have a relatively democratic organizational structure, because, for various reasons, not every kid, parent, or, teacher is ready for it. In the United States' inner cities and poor rural communities, people may be less concerned with debating the purposes of education than with overcoming the crippling obstacles

"What is important in life is life, and not the result of life."

-Johann von Goethe

that society and government have historically dealt them. Anyhow, this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper and my expertise. However, as one alumni said, democratic schools only work when students evaluate themselves and ask the question, "Do I want to be responsible for my own education yet? Am I ready?"

Also, one cannot downplay the frustrating inefficiencies that come with debates about the same things over and over again. Youth Initiative's administrator enthusiastically supports the organization's structure. She said, "In a hierarchical organization, people at the bottom fall asleep. While in an egalitarian organization, everyone has to be awake." This statement-that everyone in an egalitarian organization must be awake- is another way to say that egalitarian organizations empower everyone to care about their organization and to take initiative to improve it. Furthermore, she recognizes the purpose of the school's constant conflicts, but hopes that the debates don't hinder the school from moving forward. She said, "It is important for our school that the same arguments happen every three years, but we can't get spiraled down in the process too much. There has to be a balance between process and moving forward." While I agree with the administrator's statement, I believe that this balance between process and moving forward is another version of the conflict between antistructure and structure. It can always be debated, but will never be solved.

Debate. Debate. Debate. Process. Process. Process. Just as Christensen (1976) and Schwartzman (1987) argue that the decision-making process is more important than the decision itself at an egalitarian elementary school and community mental health center, the decision-making process *is* what Youth Initiative is. Process is what inspires students, parents, and teachers to ask themselves what is the best way to educate myself/my student in this community right now based on what I have learned from trying other approaches? Process is what enables students, parents, and teachers to act on their beliefs about the best form of education. Process is everything at YIHS.

Julia Steege hard at work at the blast furnace of education.

YIHS's students' loss of power will *not* be the thing that most negatively affects the school's mission since its democratic structure will enable students to retake their power. Rather, the loss of student initiative will most make YIHS pull away from its mission of empowerment, because open communication channels and an egalitarian power structure will collapse if students do not care. When I asked one student if he thinks the school's changes are a reflection of what students want, he answered, "I would not say that's what students want. I would say they are lazy. It's like a virus that comes through the school." Another alumni said, "while I don't really approve of the Waldorfization of the school, if that's what the students want, then that's what should happen. I guess I just get the impression that it's more what the parents want and they're pushing it on their children." These statements and the fact that one teacher said that the 2008-2009 school year is almost boring in its lack of major catastrophes and conflicts should alert people that value the school's mission that now is a vulnerable time for the school to defend itself against becoming an organization in which people at the bottom fall asleep.

THE JAMES MADISON OF YIHS

George Washington gets all the credit. He got to be the first President of the United States, immortalized by the one dollar bill and an apocryphal story about an axe and a cherry tree. A handsome figurehead, Washington's face is the one no-brainer chiseled into Mt. Rushmore.

There is no mountain for James Madison though he helped write perhaps the greatest contribution by an American to political philosophy, The Federalist Papers. *His face does not grace any denomination of our nation's currency though he almost single-handedly authored the United States Constitution. There are no moral fables with James Madison as their charming protagonist yet he was responsible for the Bill of Rights that codifies our most basic civil rights. Working tirelessly behind the scenes, lauded with precious little fanfare, Madison's brilliant philosophical perspectives, keen eye to the mechanics of human society and the power of personal motives, James Madison is perhaps one of the greatest social tinkerers of all time.*

Jacob Hundt, as drawn by Christine Zinky

Youth Initiative is lucky to have just such a mind at its disposal. Quietly working (always working, it seems) from the moment of our inception to place our school on solid philosophical and constitutional moorings, Jacob Hundt, has done perhaps more than anyone else to make this organization what it is. Somewhere in between being one of the school's founding students and its current program director, Jacob found the time to receive a Master's Degree from the University of Chicago. As his thesis for this degree Jacob created a study of the Youth Initiative High School, other area alternative schools and the community from which they sprang. The conclusion of that study is excerpted here. The thesis can be read in its entirety on our website: www.yihs.net

The character of the private schools in Viroqua and their impact on the local community seems to confirm many of the academic arguments articulated since de Tocqueville's time concerning the importance of voluntary associations for healthy civic life. By actively involving families in school governance, by bringing energy and new ideas to local education, and by crafting flexible funding schemes that allow a broad range of families to participate, Pleasant Ridge and its successors have been able to inject a remarkable degree of economic and cultural vitality into this otherwise isolated rural community. By modeling an alternative to existing institutions, Pleasant Ridge also seems to have instigated a wave of innovation and growth in both private and public education and to have attracted many new people to the area. Finally, individual relationships bridging institutional boundaries and an apparently widespread shared appreciation for "traditional country values," especially as embodied in the remembered ideal of the small rural school, seem to have allowed Viroqua to maintain a relatively strong sense of community embracing families from all of its various schools.

Viroqua is thus an anomalous community in a variety of different ways. Not only has it seen growth in alternative education unlike that of any other rural community in Wisconsin, but it has also witnessed a remarkable wave of civic organization building during a period apparently characterized by steep associational decline elsewhere in the country. As a result, Viroqua seems to have successfully cultivated a community life characterized by uncommon

"What spectacle can be more edifying or more seasonable, than that of Liberty and Learning, each leaning on the other for their mutual and surest support?"

-James Madison

vitality, especially for a rural area. In the remarks that follow, some of the theoretical conceptions of civic engagement outlined earlier will be revisited in an attempt to shed some light on this mystery.

In their study of the "Growth of Voluntary Associations in America, 1840-1940," Gamm and Putnam argue that, during the "Golden Age" of associationalism, voluntary membership groups arose with disproportionate frequency in small cities and rural areas. Following Putnam's characteristic social capital approach, the authors present the hypothesis that this apparent disparity between urban and rural areas came about as a result of the relative absence of mass forms of entertainment such as amusement parks and movie theaters in smaller communities (1999: 551). This situation, the authors argue, might have led people in these areas to spend more of their time and energy organizing and joining voluntary associations than their urban counterparts.

Although separated from the era Gamm and Putnam discuss by over a century, the situation in Viroqua during the 1970s and 1980s seems similar in a number of respects. First, Viroqua is located over an hour from the nearest mall, in La Crosse, and the town was without a movie theater for much of this period. Moreover, due to the consolidation and centralization of the public schools in rural areas, this formerly important arena of community life was becoming increasingly less open to citizen participation and also less satisfying as a field for meaningful civic involvement. Thus, people in the Viroqua area were faced with a disturbing new void in social life which they were unable, or in some cases unwilling, to fill with commercial amusements. The sense of frustration produced by this situation can be clearly heard in, for example, Dawn Hundt's comments about feeling shut out of any meaningful role in the local public schools. If Gamm and Putnam's hypothesis is correct, this would seem to be a context ripe for creative individuals to build and promote innovative new civic organizations, as in fact proved to be the case.

This situation, of course, was hardly unique to Viroqua, since rural communities everywhere were faced with similar school consolidation and bureaucratization, as well as the accompanying void in civic life. The catalyst that set Viroqua on its unusual path was the arrival of that handful of "back-to-the-landers" in the 1970s, a development apparently as random and fortuitous as the Driftless Area itself. Educated, idealistic, and essentially without connections in the local community, this loose group eschewed even the one form of commercialized mass entertainment that was readily available, namely television. Instead, the back-to-the-landers devoted their considerable creative energies to the construction of a series new, small social forms, such as food co-ops and folk festivals. Moreover, unlike many other Americans during this time, most of these people took up livelihoods characterized by a high degree of flexibility. To this day, a large proportion of Pleasant Ridge families are self-employed farmers, carpenters, craftspeople, healers, or entrepreneurs, all occupations which permit individuals to devote extra time to community projects if they so desire. Thus, they seem to have been a group of people who largely managed to avoid or escape some of the major sources of civic disengagement predicted by Putnam's theory.

"A pure democracy is a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person."

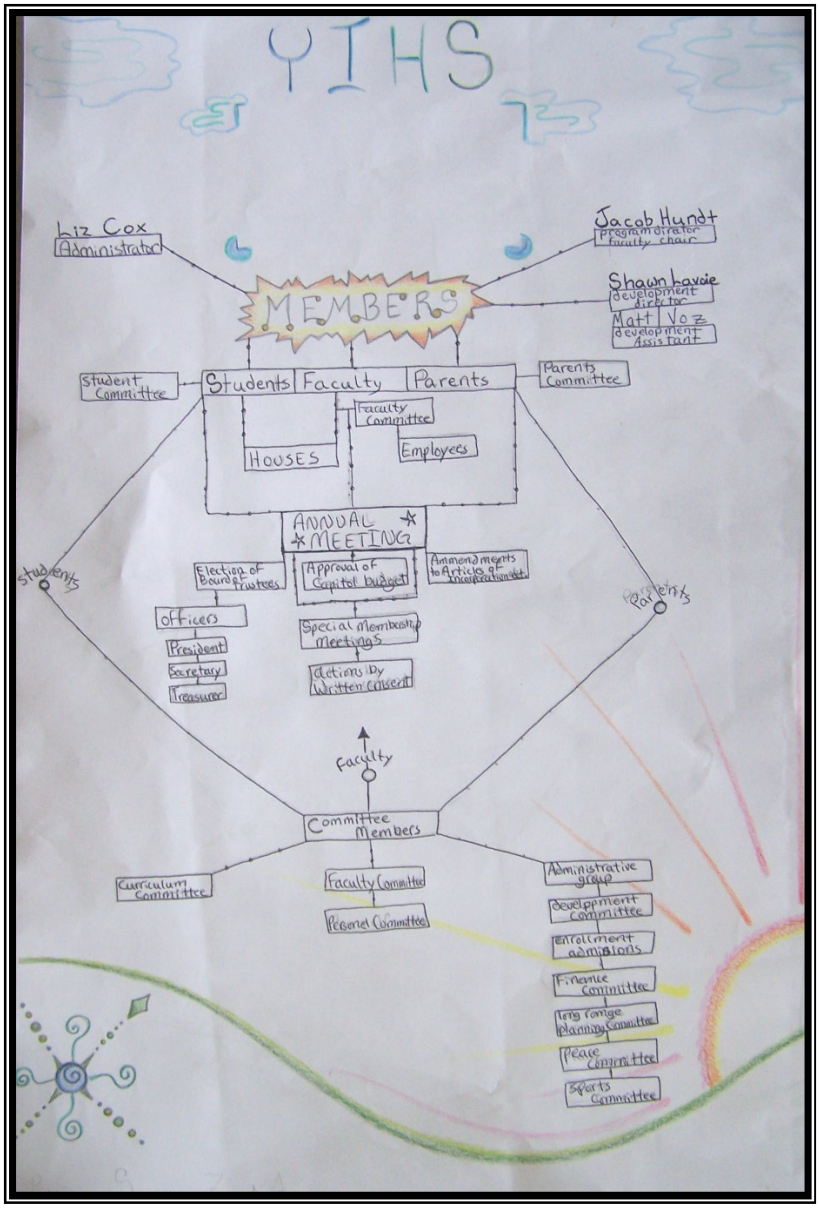
-James Madison

On the other hand, some of the back-to-the-landers also took the lead in organizing and developing novel and sometimes locally controversial projects initiated by the government or by local leaders, such as Coulee CAP and the Viroqua Day Care Center. In these efforts, they seem to have been actively assisted by their lack of deep ties to the area, which apparently freed them from a number of cognitive and social barriers that prevented local residents of longer standing from adopting new organizational models and practices. Thus, Philothea Bezin was able to jump into the project of building the Day Care Center, "because it would be fun," in part because

(Continued from page 5)

she was entirely unaware that this was a controversial proposal in the community. In this way, the back-to-the-landers were in time uniquely able to introduce badly needed new civic forms into a community that was suffering from the shrinking civic arena of the public schools. This, then, must be seen as an important qualification of Putnam's social capital theories, since it was in part precisely their initial lack of dense ties of "trust and reciprocity" which allowed the back-to-the-landers to spark civic renewal in the Viroqua area.

In addition to their freshness and lack of entanglements, the back-to-the-landers also brought with them a powerful and relatively coherent set of values and beliefs, many of which had important practical consequences. After all, it had been the ideas articulated in *Mother Earth News* and in books such as E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* that had inspired them to take the radical step of moving out into the hills in the first place. Alongside its deep respect for nature and for human freedom, this countercultural philosophy places a high moral and practical value on small, humanly-scaled, community-oriented institutions, in opposition to the "idolatry of gigantism" that Schumacher saw as rampant in modern technocratic society (Schumacher, 1973: 66). When the time came to apply this philosophy to the creation of a back-to-the-lander school, the ideal vision these ideas conjured forth was one that was oddly familiar to more rooted residents of the Viroqua area, namely, the one-room country school.

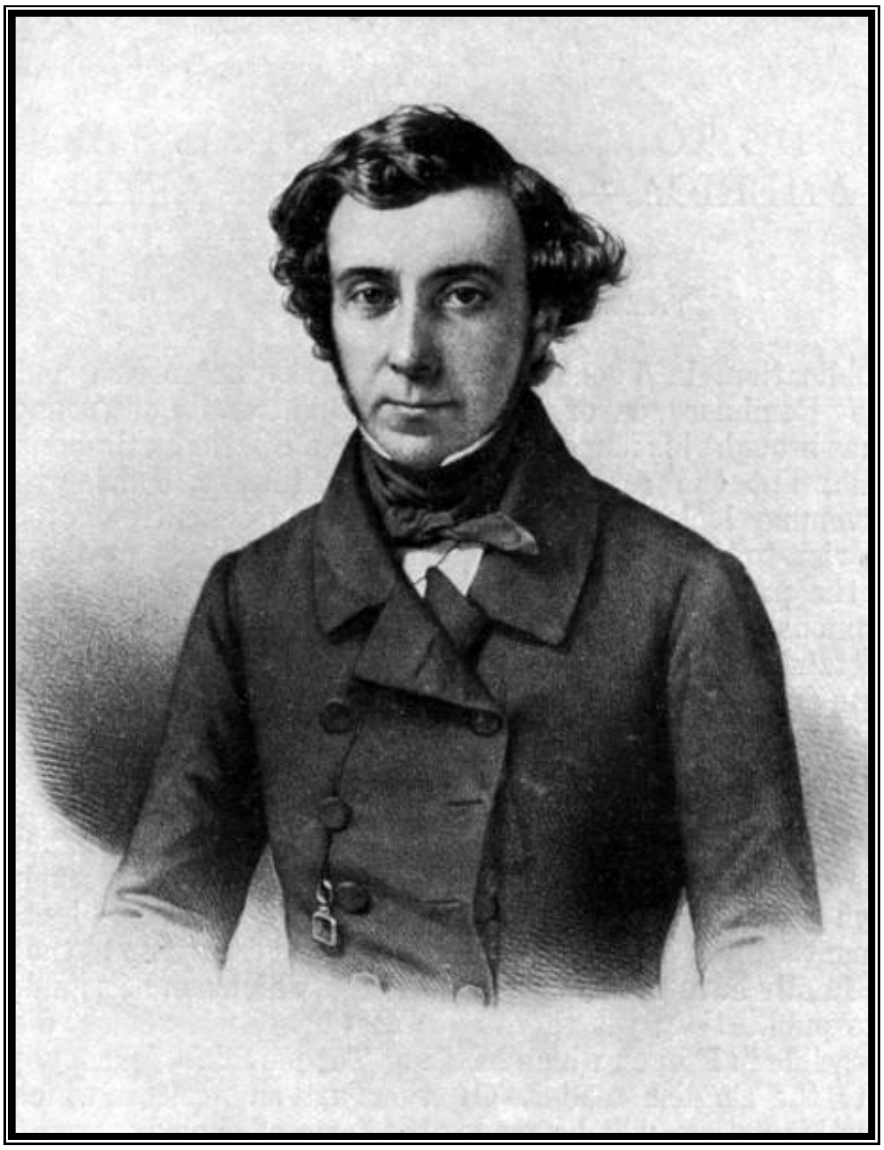


A visual representation of the YIHS governance structure made by students in the Intro to YIHS class.

In describing what she calls "repertoires of organization," Elisabeth S. Clemens writes that "models of organization are part of the cultural tool kit of any society and serve expressive or communicative as well as instrumental functions. In addition, the adoption of a particular organizational form influences the ties that an organized group forms with other organizations" (Clemens, 1993: 771). The decision of the founders of Pleasant Ridge to cast their new countercultural school in the image of the traditional country school seems to have had precisely these effects on the new school's standing within the wider community. By choosing to adopt this particular educational model from the "cultural tool kit" of American society, even if largely out of "instrumental" and somewhat intellectualized motives, Pleasant

Ridge immediately became recognizable, and even relatively legitimate, as a school among its non-countercultural neighbors, many of whom had attended and appreciated such schools themselves.

This legitimacy and cognitive plausibility, in turn, made it feasible for a non-back-to-the-landers with deep commitments to the Common School tradition like David Van Dyke to represent the school in the community and allowed it to attract local families, like the Hundts, from outside of the original founding group. As Clemens' formulation predicts, the adoption of the country school model also influenced the school's ties with other organizations. This seems to have been especially the case with the Odd Fellows. Several interviewees suggested that the country school model allowed aging members of this venerable fraternal association to recognize their handsome white meeting hall as an appropriate home for a school of this familiar type, thereby saving the Order's fondly remembered lodge from an ignominious end after the group's own demise. None of these doors would have been opened if the school founders had decided that they wanted to start an entirely novel type of school, such as one that traveled around on a bus, for example.



Alexis de Tocqueville, author of the masterful sociological treatise, Democracy in America

The choice of a familiar organizational model also appears to have allowed the founders of Pleasant Ridge to overcome some of their inherent newness and cultural strangeness in the local community. In the long run, this legitimacy, along with the school's success, enabled Pleasant Ridge to introduce a new form into the Viroqua area's organizational repertoire, which in turn seems to have helped the community combat the social void produced by the shrinking civic role of the public schools. Once Pleasant Ridge had become an accepted and valued part of the local community, it became possible for people like Sue Berg and the founders of Cornerstone Christian Academy to take the leap of starting their own non-public alternative school, albeit one based on an entirely different educational philosophy. In this way, the decision of the founders of Pleasant Ridge to invoke the ideal of the traditional country school acted as a direct cause of the ultimate proliferation of alternative schools in the area. Thus, the current vitality of Viroqua can in some ways be seen as a return, by way of a most surprising and circuitous path, to its civic roots.

LEARN, TEACH: ONE ALUMNA'S EDUCATIONAL VISION

Matilda "Tillie" Kriemelmeyer was a member of the first class of YIHS to graduate having attended all four years at the school. She went on to a similar institution, a Great Books college, Shimer College, in Chicago, Illinois. There she used the skills she had sharpened at Youth Initiative and served on the Shimer Board of Trustees as a student member and wrote her senior thesis in 2006. A portion of that thesis is excerpted here. For the complete thesis visit our website at www.yihs.net

"I attended public school until a month into my high school experience. At that point neither my parents nor I knew what my problem was, but I simply never wanted to go to school. Something that as a child I had always looked forward to and enjoyed had become a painful chore that tortured me every day. It became so bad that I would become physically ill in order to justify staying home. Most people would say that it is 'normal' for kids not to like school; but I refuse to believe that this is so, especially to this extreme. I had had no trouble completing my work up until this point and it wasn't because I didn't understand it that I became less diligent. My parents and I knew that something needed to change, so when my mother told me about a little school that had just opened up that year in another town and asked me if I wanted to go and visit, I was very excited.

At 14 years old, I walked in the door and everything that I had once thought about educational institutions was immediately brought into question. I could see from the layout of the classroom that the structure of authority was very different. Students held the freedom of bringing their bags into class with them, and of sitting wheresoever they pleased. One did not need to ask permission to go to the bathroom; one was simply trusted to come back to class afterwards. I sat down to observe the class and I felt an ease that was wholly foreign to me in relation to institutions. (I realized later that this was because it wasn't an *institution*, it was a *school*.) The class was amazing; the students never raised their hands, yet this did not create a chaotic mess. Instead, they allowed each other to speak, maintaining respect for one another, and learned together. I knew in a moment that this was where I wanted to be, so I signed up. A whole new world opened before me, but my awareness of this 'opening world' was still yet to be discovered.

A young Tillie Kriemelmeyer working with clay as a freshman in a YIHS art class.

I found out shortly before leaving the school that day that the reason everything was so different was because this school had been founded by students. Youth Initiative High School (YIHS) – it seemed to me that the name itself reflected its power. It was formed in the summer of 1996 by six teenagers who had decided that they were sick of the public and private systems to which they had been accustomed. They wanted something more original and conducive to learning for their high school experience. These pupils were from all sorts of backgrounds, and most of them had been very

good students in their previous institutions. I mention this only because it is often thought that 'alternative' schools are meant for 'problem' kids, but what does a 'problem' child really consist of anyway? In this school, at any rate, that was not the case. Certainly we had students with varying combinations of intellectual, athletic, creative strengths, and even rebelliousness, but none of our students were 'problem' children.

Most of the pupils were very capable and motivated individuals who, in almost all cases, did not have a background of delinquency. They simply did not feel properly stimulated by the public or private systems that they had been attending, so they contacted some influential people in their community and began a school that was and is based on student involvement on all levels. They were involved in curriculum planning, hiring and evaluating faculty members, and all the other works that went along with the primary designing of the school. The students were also included in governance by holding equal voting rights on all of the committees, and even the Board. Students had an equal vote on all matters because it was they who had, to a great extent, started and shaped the school. They were also surrounded by supportive parents, friends, and local business owners, which made their plans much more possible.

"In order to create a society in which people confront the world with the abilities for critical reflection and deliberate, independent action one must, at the very least, offer an education that provides for and fosters the development of such abilities."

Now, allowing students to vote and be in charge of their own education can have the effect of scaring parents to death, but I would have to say that what these parents fear is that their child is incapable of making decisions for his or herself that will be beneficial. Many parents feel that if they or some other worthy adult (i.e. teachers) do not guide their children and oversee their experience of the world, the child may become anarchic or delinquent due to the parent's negligence. Over the four years that I subsequently spent at YIHS this fear was proved to be needless, for the students showed their capability in abundance. Once given the opportunity to really *be* for themselves, they found strength and reason through their interaction with others and from within to guide them in making good decisions for the community and themselves. And after all, if parents and other adults are constantly being responsible for their children all the way up until they are ready to leave the house how will these young adults have learned to be responsible for themselves?

One student came from a public school system to YIHS. He had been expelled from his former school because he had committed a criminal act with some of his friends. At the persuasion of his friends this boy went into a grade school and vandalized their computer equipment, along with general vandalism of the building. They had been caught and, since he was a minor, he was expelled from his high school and had to do some community service. By all observable standards it would seem that this boy was prone to destructive behavior, or was more precisely a 'problem' child, but after an extremely short time at YIHS this destructive 'tendency' (if there ever was one) disappeared. He soon came to be considered one of the more responsible and intelligent students in the school. There was little social pressure for him to be any specific way except the way he actually was. One of the few social pressures that I observed exerting itself over the students was one that promoted individuality, open-mindedness, and responsibility. Thus, this young man was allowed to have another chance at education, and was able to find an environment that fostered his own intellectual abilities as well as his individual responsibility for his life. Once this so-called 'juvenile delinquent' boy was given the opportunity to partake in a much freer and more responsible form of education, he did not take advantage of it and cause more destruction, but instead was able to integrate himself with it and cultivate responsible action in himself. He went on to college after graduating and is currently living happily with his partner and their daughter.

Along with parents the teachers and administrators must also develop a trust in young peoples' ability to choose things wisely and ask for help, or make mistakes and actually deal with the effects of their actions within themselves. Once young people are able to feel supported as themselves in learning environments they have the ability to open themselves more fully to knowledge. They also are able to find a connection between the knowledge that they

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are exposed to and their inner life, thus gaining a better understanding of their own responsibility for their education. This is what this high school did for me, and I saw it happen in those around me as well.

I was directly involved in a participatory democracy through which I began to understand the weight and difficulty of political decision making. I also began to understand the importance of social contracts when one is part of a community. When I was in class I felt a kinship with my teachers because I had discussed issues with them in the political forum, worked with them on fundraisers or community service, and consulted with them on my own personal matters. I felt as though I knew these people more as insightful older friends than as authoritative teachers. I knew that at any moment I could ask a question and they would stop what they were talking about and seriously answer or open discussion about my question, so I felt *free* to learn instead of fearful and inhibited by strict guidelines and disciplinary tactics.

Behold, the glorious visage of accountability

Classes were generally conducted in lecture format, although we usually did some reading or writing in preparation. What affected me the most was that the overall mood of the class was very comfortable and focused, which made learning a collectively enjoyable process. The students who had come to the school had most definitely chosen to so they did not have much reason for complaint. They could bring up serious issues they might have, in their personal or academic life, with any teacher they felt comfortable with, either privately, at a student meeting, or an all-school meeting. Because the student's voice is listened to and held in high esteem at YIHS there are few occurrences of rebellion; the students feel no need for this because they know they are respected, and that they have the ability to change things about the school if they feel the need to. The students at YIHS are allowed to feel and also able to feel responsible for their own education.

Up From the Earth: A Study of Grassroots Schools

Vicki Eiben received her Doctorate in Education from the Fielding Graduate University, and has worked for The Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership, and Viterbo University in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. Her doctoral thesis, excerpted here, was a comparative study of three grassroots educational initiatives, our school among them, that focused on the vitality and sustainability of these institutions in rural communities. In this excerpt, Dr. Eiben draws her conclusions as to what features constitute a truly "grassroots" education. The entirety of her thesis can be downloaded form our website at www.yihs.net

Features of Visionary Grassroots Education

Three [features] are particularly central in all visionary grassroots education. The first is the public and democratic nature of grassroots education, the second is the connection of education to local place and community, and the third is the relational nature of grassroots education. A deeper understanding of what grassroots education is and

why it is of value at this time in history emerges from an elaboration of these defining features.

Public

Public education has been considered the foundation of a democratic, civic culture (Goodlad, 2004). Scholars have defined *public* as being connected to or working on behalf of the people or community, rather than private interests (Arons, 1997; Gardner, 1966; Hutchinson, 2004). Hutchinson maintained that a strong *public* in education includes the following: a) input from all interested and involved in the purpose and goals of education; b) equity in resources; c) tuition-free education; and d) inclusive to all. Gardner (1966), Milito (1995), and Porter (1995) described a truly public education as one in which every child has a right to a quality education as judged by the parents. Steiner (1985) described education as a cultural activity that should emerge from the people, in a bottom-up way, at the grassroots level. In a truly democratic society, people have the freedom to educate their children according to their conscience and values (Milito; Porter). By these standards, the current system of education in the United States falls far short of being truly public education. American education could more accurately be called government or national education. Hutchinson has asserted that schools are continuing to grow in their non-public character. This loss of public voice and control in education is seen in the enforcement of high stakes testing, the push for a nationally standardized curriculum, increased decision-making by non-educators, and an increase in corporate influence and involvement (Emery, 2002; Emery & Ohanian, 2004; Hutchinson, 2004).

Dr. Eiben receives a Poster Session award for her research into sustainable schools

Another example of the loss of public voice and participation in education is the involvement of the Business Round Table (BRT) in education (Emery, 2002). The BRT has coordinated an effort to bring together corporate business leaders, politicians, and private and non-profit organizations to influence education. The purpose of the BRT has been to direct the public school system to reflect the structure of the new global economy and workplace and to exert control over American political and cultural life. The BRT has worked to eliminate local community participation in developing educational policy and to consolidate educational policy development at the state and national level. Emery (2002), who did extensive research on the involvement of the BRT in education, described the BRT involvement as efforts to create a "corporate hegemony over American political and cultural life" (p. 7). Both Goals 2000 (R. Miller, 1995) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Meier & Wood, 2004) also reflect this strategy.

Various writers have described American education as losing its public nature and being colonized by corporate and political interests, and more recently military interests (Berlak, 1995; Emery, 2002; Saltman & Gabbard, 2003). Colonialism, according to Said (1994), is defined as "the establishment and maintenance of settlements on someone else's territory" (p. 7). This can include land, resources, and wealth, but also ideas and various forms of knowledge. With the national agenda that was begun with Goals 2000 and continued with NCLB, a monopoly on ideas and knowledge has formed. Berlak described this colonization as a form of "deliberate, coercive cultural control managed from the top by testing" (p. 139). Toll (2001) asserted that those with power are directing school change in service to their own political agendas. This perspective is elaborated on in the discussion of democracy later in this chapter.

In recent years, the growth of community learning centers, learning cooperatives, homeschooling, private schools, and various community-based education initiatives has been a response to this educational control (Miller, 2000). Hutchinson (2004) described two possibilities to return the *public* to education: either the institutions must

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change to re-engage the true sense of public, or "public education must be seen as divorced from its current sponsoring agencies and offered anew through a self-determined form of people's voice, work, and responsibility" (p. 43). Some communities are beginning to explore this second possibility, seeking to create public educational opportunities that are not government controlled and emerge from the local context to serve a wide variety of community needs. Berlak (1995) described an era of decolonization and cultural reformation currently underway as people and communities strive to reclaim or create their cultural identities. Grassroots education can be seen as part of a cultural process of decolonization and cultural renewal that returns the *public* to public education.

Place-based

A second defining quality of grassroots education is its place-based nature. Every place has a human history, a geological history, and is part of a particular ecosystem with unique flora, fauna, and environmental issues. Every place has a set of unique human influences of culture, economy, and politics. Place-based or place-conscious education is an approach to education in which educators intentionally build connections between students, communities, and the physical environment, making the word *local* in local public school take on new meaning (Bauch, 2001; Orr, 1992; Theobald, 1997). Most schools operate as isolated entities within a community and are indistinguishable from one locale to another. Local culture, history, and the natural environment are simply a backdrop for school location. A pedagogy of place challenges the idea that "education is a passive, indoor activity" (Orr, 1992, p. 87) and instead involves integrating the school into the day-to-day activities of the community, engaging the curriculum with historical sites, local oral history, geographical formations, wilderness and wildlife experiences, local agriculture, forestry, and numerous community activities and events. Students are encouraged to be members of society now, rather than waiting until they become adults and enter the workforce. In contrast, the current system of education "has become a great homogenizing force, undermining local knowledge, indigenous languages, and the self-confidence of placed people" (Orr, 1994, p. 129). The core of place-conscious education is learning to live well now, where one is.

An example of place-based education: YIHS students learn about biodiversity through the hands on eradication of the invasive Garlic Mustard species in southwestern Wisconsin.

Place-based education includes the following key elements (Nachtigal & Haas, 2000): *cultural*—local histories, personal stories, and folk culture; *ecological*—knowledge and understanding of and care for the physical environment; *civic*—discussion and engagement in issues of local concern; *economic*—involvement in local economic activities and development of an understanding of the value of

small-scale, local endeavors; and *entrepreneurial*—involvement in initiating and running small-scale businesses that serve a need in the community.

Students take a field trip into the wilderness to learn about Karst geology in the Driftless Region

Smith (1998) proposed that in order to nurture a sense of place in education, guidance can come from other societies who have a history of creating sustainable communities in which people feel an intimate connection and long-term commitment to their land and to each other. Traditional cultures share a number of essential understandings about the nature of the world and people's role in it. Place-conscious educators value and build on these qualities of traditional cultures: a sense of identity and rootedness in the soil of a place, connections with family and community, and a sense of essential vocation (Oliver et al., 2002). Traditional approaches to learning offer a beneficial perspective because learning has not been separated from daily life, the community, or the environment.

A large body of research strongly supports the positive effects of place-based education. Across the research, one can see a clear indication that when students are involved in place-based learning experiences, they engage more fully and enthusiastically in learning, they do better academically, they take greater pride in and ownership for their learning, and behavior issues diminish (State Education and Environment Roundtable, 1998). The State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER), founded in 1995, has conducted and gathered extensive research that documents the academic and behavioral benefits of using the environment as a context for learning (SEER, 1998, 2000, 2005). Research projects have been conducted at school sites in California (American Institute of Research, 2005; Lieberman & Hoody, 1998), Florida (Abrams, 1999; Athman & Monroe, 2004), Louisiana (Emekauwa, 2004), Maryland (Von Secker, 2004), South Carolina (Falco, 2004), and Washington (Bartosh, 2004).

In addition, the National Environmental Education Training Foundation (2000) conducted research in Arkansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin involving thousands of students. One study, Closing the Achievement Gap (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998), exemplified the extensive nature of the research and the type of results. Researchers examined 40 schools and involved more than 400 students and 250 teachers and administrators. The primary results included higher scores on standardized measures of achievement in targeted subject areas, reduced discipline and classroom management problems, increased student engagement and enthusiasm for learning, and greater pride and ownership in students' accomplishments. SEER has developed a model that is based on their research and the contributions of the twelve state departments that are part of SEER. The model (EIC—using the **E**nvironment as an **I**ntegrating **C**ontext for learning) incorporates the "best practices" that were observed in the research. The six recognized best practices include: a) interdisciplinary instruction, b) collaboration among teachers, students, and community members, c) community-based studies that offer experiential learning relevant to students' lives, d) learner-centered approaches that build on students' interests, knowledge, experiences, and needs, e) both

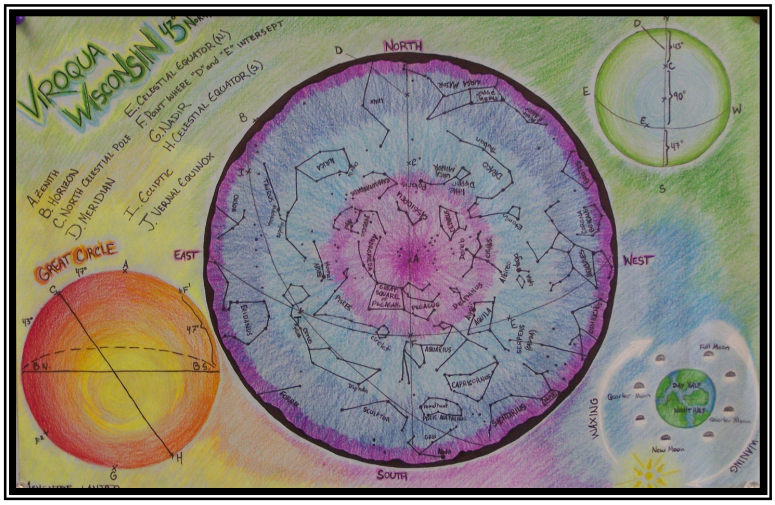
(Continued from page 13)

collaborative and independent experiences, and f) instruction, learning, and service projects in the local community. In addition, the All of a Place Institute for Connecting Schools, Youth, and Communities also found that place-based learning is particularly beneficial in rural areas (Chin, 2001).

A number of philosophers and educators (Bauch, 2001; Bell, 2005; Berry, 1990; Glassman & Crowson, 2001; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Nachtigal & Haas, 2000; Orr, 1992; Theobald, 1997) have articulated benefits of place-based education that are very similar to the benefits identified by researchers in the previous paragraphs.

- Place-based education combines intellect and experience.
- It brings subject matter alive.
- It enhances motivation and engagement.
- It encourages interdisciplinary thinking.
- It builds lasting connections between students and their communities.
- It values and builds on community diversity.

Social researchers, philosophers, educators, and others are advocating for a more local and place-based education. Goodlad (2004) observed that the more education has moved away from local control and debate, the more it is considered to be failing its public role. As a result, an increase in privatization of various forms has resulted. Schools prior to the industrial revolution were extensions of the local community. Reformers in the late 1800s saw this localness as a detriment to effective schooling (Tyack, 1974). They believed that community control allowed for heavy influence from local politics that often encouraged inadequate facilities and low pay, as well as ineffective supervision. The belief was that a technological, urban society demanded a professionalizing of schooling that was only possible by removing control from the local level.



Main Lesson Work for the Astronomy Block:

The Heavens, as seen from Viroqua, WI by Ashontae Lantro

Educators who propose the revival of a form of localized education must address certain cautions. These cautions include: a) Beadie (2001) emphasized that those who are involved in localized education must have a heightened awareness of the networks of power and affiliation that come into play at the local level and are likely to be a factor in educational issues; b) leaders in educational change, Fullan and Miles (1992), have agreed that all large-scale change must begin locally; yet, they cautioned that all control should not be turned over to the individual school, assuming that only the local level is of importance; c) Csikszentmilyi (1993) asserted that decentralized decision-making does not work unless those involved know what they want and are able to seek that which is good for the community; d) Freire (1995) cautioned that it is a mistake to become so focused on the local level that a vision of the whole becomes obscured; e) Emery (2002) and Esteva and Prakash (1998) identified a risk for grassroots and alternative efforts to be co-opted by existing systems of corporate and political power; f) government at any level holds the

(Continued from page 14)

power to create and maintain cultural hegemony, if it chooses, and it has the power to "indoctrinate rather than educate" (Theobald & Snauwaert, 1993, p. 42); g) generations of children have suffered discrimination in the hands of local control. In order to avoid the historical challenges of local education, people who are involved in grassroots initiatives must be sensitive to and address issues of equity and inclusivity and strive to reflect diversity that is representative of the local area.

YIHS students serve lunch to the community as a part of their nutrition class.

Relational

Visionary grassroots education is defined by the centrality of relationships and community. Numerous educators have advocated that relationships based in community should be the primary focus of education: Belenky et al., (1997), Cajete (1994), Darling-Hammond (1993), Eisler (2002), Martin, (1992), Mc Caleb (1994), Noddings (1995); Orr (1994); Palmer (1998), and Theobald (1997), to name a few. Cajete clearly expressed this shared value. He suggested that "education is, at its essence learning about life through participation, relationship, and community" (p. 28). Children need, from the beginning, to be part of healthy communities, investing themselves in ongoing relationships. Ideally, learning is intergenerational and interdisciplinary and takes place in a variety of contexts connected to home, community, and to the natural environment. These valuable learning contexts have been virtually ignored by education. Smith (1981), who has studied cultures around the world, observed that no other culture has separated people from their environment to the extent that American society has. Physicists Zohar and Marshall (1994) maintained that a system that "falls out of dialogue with its environment" (p. 199) ceases to function. Schools have fallen out of dialogue with their environment. They have isolated themselves from families, communities, and the natural world, and as a result, they have sabotaged their educational potential.

Rutter's (2006) research is especially pertinent in this discussion. He examined the role of community in children's learning and concluded that the absence of deep and enduring relationships and weak or absent social cohesion in the community were factors that placed children at risk. The presence of strong relationships and community cohesion support learning.

In addition, Israeli psychologist, Feurstein (1986), in his seminal research, also addressed the important role of community and cultural ties in learning. He emphasized that intelligence is a flexible, dynamic system that develops throughout life, and people's connections to their native culture are critical in developing their potential. When these ties are cut or not supported, individuals' development and intelligence suffer (Howard, 1996). Cultural knowledge and connections are central in grassroots education.

When implemented effectively, grassroots initiatives intend to bring to education the public presence, the democratic voice, a deep sense of place, and a life-giving involvement with community. Grassroots initiatives serving children, families, and communities take a variety of forms in the U.S.: community learning centers, learning cooperatives, folk schools, and some alternative schools.

Thank You to the sponsors of this issue of the Kaleidoscope!