



Current Events

how they can be used to empower students

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I doubt that anyone in this community, state or country does not understand the importance of each child receiving a good education. Yet for large numbers of children and youth they never experience the learning ephiphany which can lead to life-long learning. In efforts to improve learning outcomes, teachers and parents alike often refer to those "teachable moments," the opportunities for accelerating and deepening learning provided by local, national and world events.

During the summer of 2002, three widely covered media events provided those interested in learning and teaching unique opportunities. One was the abduction of Erica Pratt and her escape by chewing through duct tape and racing to freedom through a window in a house in a poor section of Philadelphia. What she exhibited in escape was an indomitable spirit born of intelligence. Hopefully her teachers are able to help her and others to accelerate in their learning by tapping into her problem-solving ability and motivation to use it to solve the puzzles of reading, math, science and social studies.

Another story was of the L.A. County teenagers who were abducted and taken on a harrowing ride that could have led to their deaths. The teenagers survived however, due to the support of the national Amber Alert system. And they survived because of the leadership provided by community officials, a caring community and systems which were put into place to help rather than hinder, the two girls who were rescued. Similar strategies and commitments were also used to rescue the trapped miners in Pennsylvania. Each is instructive to those interested in teaching people the power of collaborative partnerships, the power of leadership, goodwill and the importance of unanimity in communities.

This year the nation and the world is witnessing U.S. led coalition forces attempts to bring democracy to Iraq through the removal of a totalitarian leader. All of the citizens in the nation and here in Connecticut are bombarded with information about the war. As with last summer we are afforded another opportunity for using the "teachable moment" to accelerate learning. Teachers and parents once again have an opportunity to guide their children and students to deeper understandings through the knowledge gleaned from media reports. Stories of rescue abound, such as the rescue of missing soldiers due to the bravery of Iraq citizens and coalition forces, and securing the safety of Iraqi children who have witnessed first-hand the agony of war.

The data emerging from the war provides scaffolding or background experience ¹that deepen the learning experience. For example, a lesson which uses the war as a framework might involve the following activities at various stages of student development:

1. observing (looking at the students' world and problems);
2. comparing (identifying differences and similarities or fitting the "new" into the familiar);
3. identifying assumptions (sharing background knowledge, expressing opinions, recognizing values);
4. collecting data (reading newspapers, magazines, and stories; listening to the radio and watching TV for deepening "critical thinking");
5. organizing data (classifying and categorizing);
6. interpreting data (summarizing, generalizing, hypothesizing, theorizing);
7. inquiring further (designing projects, identifying and interviewing specialists for surveying the public, doing library research, reporting new findings);
8. analyzing and evaluating (synthesizing, criticizing and reflecting on new ideas; reevaluating assumptions, problem solving); and
9. decision making (volunteering, participating in workshops, community service, collective action).

By using targeted current events we are in essence leveling the playing field for the learners. The equal starting gate is provided by what we all are exposed to -- those common experiences (such as the war) which can lead to improved reading comprehension, reflective, critical and flexible thinking. All characteristics necessary for an educated community to maintain the promise of democracy. Rather than shrill catcalls because of variant opinions, citizen learners who have been taught to withhold judgement, based on a topic while data is collected, become more flexible more collaborative when engaging differing points of view.

Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick in "The American Dream and the Public Schools (2003)," believe that education "...is a deeply political enterprise, regardless of how much people try to hide that point behind professionalism, nonpartisanship or abdication to the market." In our community of Stamford, Connecticut, stories and letters to the editor about a wide range of topics provide a framework for change and at times citizens responses can be characterized as shrill, (e.g., the funding of our schools, a need for socio-educational systems which can improve achievement, response to a budget crisis, a perceived absence of leadership in education administration). Yet if we are to experience long term success and community health, all of our citizens must work to develop engagements which can lead to broad scale adaptations, e.g., changing beliefs of parents and educational professionals about student capacity for learning, celebrating individual differences and beliefs, developing sensitivity to the conflicts about what parents want for their own children and what they want for "other people's children." Our goal must be to help the community recognize that if the



citizens continue to place their personal and perceived interest of their own group above the common interests of all of the residents, then the outcome may result in a political and policy crisis which can lead to social conflicts.

When our perceptions and expectations expand to recognize the power of culture, language, individual differences and belief systems, we can explore the endless opportunities for creating the bridges between differing point of views and what emerges through collaborative leadership. These bridges allow students and citizens to see connections and relationships between their world and the world opening to us through national and global engagements. This will demand honest dialogue, leadership and education which can lead to flexible thinking -- necessary to put our community and our citizens on an equitable footing. The end result of learning in and out of the classroom should be the development of thoughtful and mindful adults who are capable of performing higher-order tasks such as elaboration, analysis, evaluation, synthesis and representation. Let's not lose out on the opportunities that current events play in engaging more or us in solving those problems our community face. Let's not forget those past, present and future stories of leadership, perserverance, emotions and strength of mind which saved Erica Pratt, the two teenagers and the miners last summer, and more recently coalition soldiers and many citizens of Iraq. It takes commitment, the community and systems for all to be succeed. As my son's coach exhorts us on each of his Little League e-mail reminders: "We are One!"

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