
CHARTER OF THE
Sangha Project

*A NEIGHBORHOOD BASED
LEARNING COMMUNITY*

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I. Introduction

This current version of a charter for a public, neighborhood-based middle school has evolved over the past seventeen years.

I began my vocation as an educator in 1989, serving first as a substitute teacher for the New York Public School District. Over the years, both the emotional and cognitive readiness of children entering into the arena of public education has deteriorated; it is no accident that there has been an overall deterioration in the general culture and society in which these children are embedded. This charter attempts to create an overall, "holistic" environment in which the emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual needs of human beings are actively addressed.

During a graduate education seminar entitled "School and Society," it pointed out that the concept and practice of public education is poised as one component of a triune dynamic in the life of the United States; it is situated between "political ideology" and "political economy." "Political Economy" might be defined as all of the organizational factors of the overall structures in the operation of a national polity; it also includes how and why these structures are organized; and "ideology" might be understood as the face that a nation turns towards the outside, in its relation to other nations; this is formed by the opinion that it has of itself, which is to say, what it believes about itself. It was further pointed out that both of these factors – ideology and economy – shape the aims and structures of our educational systems. I began to wonder how our social and civic lives might be transformed if our "educational" needs shaped and informed the rest of our society. What would be the result if all of our institutions were structured and oriented to actively promote the outcome of the fullest flowering - the highest good - of

its citizens? This led me to a different, yet parallel question: how do we receive and welcome new life into the world? How can we design the educational, economic, political, psychological and spiritual institutions so that are congruent with life's natural tendency towards wholeness and completion? This enters into the realm of Stewardship.

This charter can be thought of as the very beginning of a response to both of those questions.

II. Mission Statement

The mission of the Sangha Project is to provide seventh and eighth grade students with an environment through which the cognitive, emotional, physical and spiritual unfolding of each individual – whether student or staff member - is radically deepened and accelerated; this will be accomplished through a curriculum that addresses those components of Human Being. All participants – whether students, staff, administration, parents, teachers - are designated as “students” in this school. This unfolding is the prerogative of the human condition.

III. Community

The foundation of any human unfolding must be in the context of authentic community. At the commencement of each academic year, students will participate in school-wide, grade/classroom level community building activities with the goal of achieving a radical sense of interpersonal intimacy, resulting in a pervasive sense of “membership” – as an environment to which an individual has a sense of “belonging to.” “Truth-telling” and then a structured and contained experience of grieving the wounds of the past in each individual life before participating witnesses is key to this approach to

community. This process will be modeled on the Life, Death and Transition Workshops once offered by the late Elizabeth Kubler Ross, and facilitated by the program leaders of those workshops. Students will be required to participate in these activities at the conclusion of July, and would last through late August, culminating in a school-wide retreat. Once a radical degree of transparency, leading to a radical degree of interpersonal intimacy is achieved, the intrapersonal dimension of Being is also radically altered. An enhanced relationship to life, characterized by a generous, open-ended relationship to existence is the result. This is the foundation on which the construction of an authentic life is based.

In order to promote a sense of interdependence among all participants, both the context of polity and in the overall operation of the community, the general functioning of the school will be structured as a web, using ongoing "posts" that participants are required to occupy. Each post has a specific and critical role in the overall operation of the school; the execution of the tasks of each post is dependent on the execution of the tasks of all of the other posts.

Each school day will begin with a school-wide assembly, with all members in active participation, which ritually expresses the values of gratitude, community and authenticity.

IV. An Approach To Cognitive Development

Our approach to cognitive development might best be termed "Cognitive Constructivism." It is a pedagogical philosophy that is characterized by the dynamic, ongoing struggle to assimilate or accommodate new insights and

learning through the expansion or dismantling of existing cognitive schemas. Schemas are cognitive structures that organize our worldviews. This struggle to accommodate new learning through prior knowledge, or the dismantling of existing schemas, is a process that is socially and culturally mediated.

The massive resistance to Copernicus' discovery that the earth revolved around the sun is a cultural/social collective demonstration of the dismantling of prior schemas to assimilate new knowledge that resulted in a new paradigm.

Cognitive Constructivism as we are using the term is a hybrid of the philosophies of Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. While Piaget conceived of the developmental nature of cognition, it was Vygotsky that demonstrated the social/cultural nature of cognition and learning. For Vygotsky, all learning occurs primarily in the realm of the "Interhuman," and only then is it internalized in the individual. This is the foundation of the crucial requirement for small "group" work in each classroom. Vygotsky also theorized the existence of the "ZPD" – or "Zone of Proximal Development." The ZPD is the gap between an individual's current level of cognitive development and the next step in that development. Vygotsky rejected Piaget's model that cognitive development was "botanical" in nature: the claim that cognitive growth was primarily the individual's internal response to random stimuli. Vygotsky instead recognized that all development is the product an act of sustained mediation in a social setting between individuals of greater development with those of lesser. It was those with a greater degree of growth that served as a scaffold, activating the next stage of growth in the

others. For Vygotsky, all growth – unfolding – occurs from the outside – socially - through mediation with others, is internalized through reflection, and then becomes individually expressed.

The central insights of the “Whole Language” approach to literacy development indicate that the activities of listening, speaking, reading and writing are not only modes of language, but are themselves the instrumental extensions of cognition. Since listening and speaking are the first cognitive processes to develop in humans, they are then the most direct corridors to cognitive development. In our approach to cognitive development, we will utilize the processes of listening and speaking, with reading and writing, in the practice of the dialogical approach to pedagogy. Based on years of classroom practice, it seems most efficient to construct our day-to-day classroom practice on the following order: The reading of a whole section of text as a point of departure for what follows; a sustained dialogue, characterized by critical thinking questioning that utilizes prior knowledge in the social construction of new insights (speaking and listening) on the content of that text – what the current literature on literacy development terms “the Grand Conversation”; with writing to follow as an elaboration and further construction/continuation of the dialogue, constructing further insight. When content is constructed in this manner – not through prescriptive teaching but through critical thinking – then the content flows from within the student outward; there is group ownership for this new knowledge.

What follows is a formula of cognitive development through Socratic Dialogue that blends the insights of Piaget with Vygotsky's theory of the ZPD:

1. Equilibration (Adaptation – adjustment to the environment)

2. Cognitive Dissonance:

(arrival of new content that is not congruent with existing schemas, resulting in a lack of adaptation)

3. Assimilation: Prior knowledge is activated as a bridge to the assimilation of new content, and this is followed by, if possible, the absorption of that new content into existing schemas.

OR

4. Accommodation: Even though prior knowledge is activated, it is not resonant with new knowledge; this necessitates the reconfiguration of existing schemas to incorporate new content.

5. Equilibration on a higher level

The actual "zone of proximal development occurs from stages two through four; note that this process is mediated through a sustained "magisterial" and "Socratic" dialogue with an individual who possesses the cognitive capacities that are lacking in the student.

The actual classroom practice will consist of three central uses of language. First, there are situations when a more prescriptive mode of delivering content will be useful. In this mode, academic content is delivered as explanation. This is the most fundamental form of delivery. In the second mode, both Socratic and Magisterial dialogues will be intermixed. The Socratic form is open ended; new content is constructed with prior knowledge acting as a base. In the magisterial approach, the "master" or

authority has a specific outcome in mind; the purpose of the dialogue is to adroitly guide the student to the understanding of that outcome. In effect, the magisterial mode is manipulative in nature. All three modes will be incorporated into a teacher's classroom practice.

The incorporation of the arts – whether it be visual, linguistic, theatrical or dance will be incorporated as vehicles of developing the critical degree of “cognitive dissonance” necessary for the construction of new schemas; in addition, of course, the arts will be a means of expressing new insight.

V. Classroom Structure

In order to best incorporate the Constructivist approach to cognitive development, the classroom will be structured into four small groups, with no more than five participants in each group. The daily practice in each of our classrooms, using the California State Curriculum as our foundation to the delivery of grade appropriate content will be to begin our work as a whole group. Each instructor will prescriptively deliver content, based on prior reading/dialogue; each group will then meet independently to dialogue with a critical thinking question among them, and later to present their construction of a response to the whole group. During this latter phase, the whole group has the opportunity to Socratically dialogue on each individual group topic, with guiding interjections – either in the form of prescriptions or orienting questions - by the instructor. At the conclusion of this phase, students will be led into writing exercises – full-fledged essays or “quick-writes” that embody the work of our session. Students will also have regular opportunities to both arrive to and express insight through the arts. Each group will be required to

regularly produce projects – incorporating and synthesizing as many of the various art disciplines as possible – that articulate the specific content of the subject matter that is being studied.

With the possible exception of the mathematics content area, the Social Studies Curriculum will be the pivot around which the entire content base of each classroom will be organized and arranged. Social Studies – the study of relationships that, in a macrocosmic sense, unfold as the dynamic process of history is a natural pivot and point of departure in our development as authentically educated people.

VI. Physical Education

Our physical education curriculum will center on the living arts of Tai Chi and Yoga, along with the practice of nonsectarian mindfulness meditation practice that incorporates readings of the scriptures of various world religious traditions. This will occur each day immediately following the school wide opening.

VII. Sacred Justice Work

As engaged citizens, all members of our community will be participate in projects in the context of the community in which we are embedded. Such projects will include neighborhood development, including tasks such as the creation of mini parks and gardens, extending to the renovation (repairing/painting) of the living spaces of those in financial need; larger projects such as the full-scale renovation of abandoned buildings to create living spaces for people without homes will be a critical part of our education, to activate and express what Aristotle considered the “civic instinct.”

VIII. An Agricultural Project

Our school will create and manage a small-scale agricultural project. Each classroom/grade level will be responsible for the planting and care of an assigned section of the plot; each classroom/grade level will have an assigned time each day to work. The more academic, classroom content will, as far as possible, be integrated into this project, but note that this work will be engaged in for its own sake. Students desperately need to move themselves into a less mediated relationship to life, and such a project can accomplish that aim. The produce yielded will be used to prepare meals during our "Feast/Celebration" night – and event that will be open to the entire community – to individuals and families whether or not they are directly related to the school community.

IX. Polity

A board consisting of a Director, teachers, and informed parents and students will govern the school. In as far as possible, all decisions regarding the institution will be agreed upon through a process that is related to a Quaker Discernment Meeting. All decisions will be the result of consensus.

X. General Considerations

The California State Standards that govern the content and sequence of the acquisition of academic content will be retained; our academic program will stress a more "holistic" and Constructivist approach to the attainment of those goals, and seeks to address other dimensions of being human that are normally not present in a school setting.

Our school day will begin at 8am, and conclude at 6pm to allow time for both a more moderate pace in learning as well as for the incorporation of the arts as well as the other alternative programs into our curriculum. Embedded into each grade level will be a "task" that students are required to complete that coincides with the developmental stages as developed by Piaget, Eriksson, and Kohlberg. This task may be viewed as an "initiation" into the next grade level.