

Panacea or prescription?

In the rush to enlist support for Community Education, the professionals in the field are running the risk of being charged with quackery. Too often Community Education is sold in the same manner that "snake oil" was once sold from the back of a medicine wagon. We pull our wagon into town, gather a crowd of people and then we start our spiel.

"Do you suffer from juvenile delinquency, vandalism, defeated bond issues? Are you regretful of the past, alienated from the present, afraid of the future? Is your divorce rate up and your community support rate down? Are your high school graduates illiterate, your senior citizens forgotten and your marriages boring? Then step right up and receive the elixir of life, the panacea for all of your problems—Community Education."

For many of us, our job is finished when the sale is finalized, when a commitment is made to begin a Community Education program. We then pack up our wagons and move down the road to the next town.

But what happens in the towns that accept Community Education as a remedy for all of their ills? Often what happens is this: Each element of the community selectively listens to our spiel. They define Community Education as a solution to their particular problem. The school superintendent is sure that, as a result of a Community Education program, the community will be more supportive of their schools. The teachers have some vague hope that the attitudes of their students will improve. School board members believe that a Community Education program will reduce vandalism and increase student achievement in their schools. Several citizens believe that they are going to have a meaningful voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

The result of this confusion of goals is that each special interest group narrowly defines Community Education as a program that can be imposed on a community to solve a specific problem. The result of this confusion of goals and narrowly defined focus is that only one facet of Community Education is developed.

In one community, Community Education consists of taking college classes "off campus" to a local school site. In another community, Community Education is an expanded adult education program. For others Community Education is an evening program of arts and crafts, recreation or academic subjects. These activities are all well and good, particularly if they develop as a result of the community members jointly identifying the unique needs of their community and then developing unique programs to meet these needs. However, this is often not the case. Instead of accepting Community Education as a process of involving people in the decision making process, Community Education is often seen as a packaged product that will magically solve the problems of a community.

It is my belief that Community Education must not be sold as a nostrum or cure-all, but as a prescription, or process of action. Before a prescription can be made, there must be some agreement as to the diagnosis. Before a diagnosis is made the nature of the community problem must be discovered by examination and analysis. Community Education should not be offered as a solution to a specific problem, instead it should be presented as a process aimed at helping the entire community to identify and prioritize their problems and to develop the skills necessary to solve these problems. Implicit in Community Education is the assumption that the community is qualified to determine its own malaise.

The crucial need in Community Education today is the ability to help a community develop diagnostic and prescriptive skills. The professional Community Educator must assist local communities in strengthening and broadening their capabilities to involve the citizenry in the decision making processes that affect their lives.

Although there is agreement that citizen leadership and responsibility are essential in order to have an effective Community Education program, many professionals do little to facilitate community involvement. Many of us talk a better game than we play.

Community Education faces three serious dangers. It faces the danger of being defined so broadly that it loses clarity and effectiveness. It faces the danger of being defined so narrowly that it becomes just another program. And it faces the danger of becoming centralized, with the decision making power resting in the hands of the professionals. The true genius of Community Education is the belief that people have the power to transcend the alienation that is increasingly being experienced by citizens today. Community Education has proven itself an effective process that can help citizens recapture a sense of community. Community Education can help schools, service agencies, governmental agencies and citizens join together to face and solve the problems facing society today. Community Educators must not lose sight of the unique thrust of Community Education—a process of involvement.

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