

Learning: A Life-Long Journey

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Eugenia Mosby gave up on school when she was 17. She didn't see the pay-off and learning didn't fit the lifestyle she was caught up in.

Ten years later, she was rehabilitating a life nearly wrecked by cocaine. She had two young children and doing right by them stroked a desire to earn a GED. In the process, she developed a thirst for learning. She is a working professional today, confident in the future and secure in knowing she is a better mother and role model to her children.

"It's amazing to me," she said. "It's like, although I've been alive a long time, I've only been living a short time."

Research suggests learning can and should be a life-long process that is promoted and supported from the early months of a child's life and throughout adulthood, in formal settings as well as informal ones.

It is difficult to overstate the potential benefits.

Knowledge breeds motivation, competence, and confidence – all keys to personal success. It also inspires understanding, tolerance, and compassion – qualities that help blunt bigotry and violence and strengthen communities.

Quality early learning experiences give children a much better chance to succeed in school and later, as adults. And, as Mosby showed, even adults who discover the value of learning long after their formal school years stand to reap considerable benefits.

Recently, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization endorsed the concept of life-long learning as "one of the keys to the 21st century."¹

Family Support & Learning

At the dawn of a new century, the Allegheny County family support movement finds itself well-positioned to promote and support life-long learning within the neighborhoods its 30 family centers serve.

- Family support in Allegheny County is built on many of the same principles critical to the concept of life-long learning. Both, for example, are community-based and must be culturally-sensitive and willing to offer families a strong voice in shaping their futures if they are to succeed.
- A focus on building from a person's strengths – a bedrock family support principle – is also important to nurturing learning throughout a lifetime.

- Family centers already offer some learning activities for young children and parents, including child development services, parenting education, and career guidance.
- Life-long learning, by advocating for learners of all ages, fits family support's primary mission of supporting children ages zero to five years and their families.

The idea of promoting life-long learning also compliments community building, a philosophy for strengthening the social and economic fabric of at-risk neighborhoods that the Allegheny County Family Support Policy Board endorsed last year.

Timothy McNulty, whose job was to recruit businesses to Pennsylvania, discovered companies don't only weigh brick and mortar issues when choosing a place to locate a plant. Ranking right up there with the sites, tax rates, and incentives a community has to offer is the capacity and willingness of its residents to learn.

"All of the good ones want to look at the third grade class in the community they are thinking about going to," said McNulty, an economic development official in the Ridge Administration. "They're making a commitment. They want to assess the futures of the people who will work for them."²

Ever-Increasing Need

Americans today find they must adapt to an ever-changing job market and rapid technological advances.

Increasing numbers of jobs require that people be more than merely literate. They must be able to read challenging material, perform sophisticated calculations, and solve problems independently.

People predisposed to being life-long learners develop basic tools that help them rise to such challenges.

- They develop a curiosity about the world.
- They become competent problem solvers.
- They grow comfortable with asking questions.
- They become confident in using resources to find the answers.

Quality early care and education can help young children meet the challenges of a more demanding future. Studies report encouraging outcomes among children who had quality early learning experiences, including higher IQ scores, lower high school drop-out rates, and fewer arrests as adults.³

Basic adult education can provide new skills, but also improve other aspects of a person's life. Adults who complete adult literacy programs not only have higher rates of employment, but they also report higher levels of self esteem, and greater involvement in community organizations.⁴

Learning can also be contagious. “Seeing a parent in a learning mode is an incredibly powerful influence,” said Peg Sprague, Senior Associate with the Families and Work Institute in New York. “You really help your children understand how important learning is when they see you doing it to.”

No Boundaries

The concept of life-long learning argues that everyone is capable of learning. And plenty of evidence suggests learning and its benefits do not abide by boundaries of age, gender, and race.

Recent brain research reveals that children, in the years from birth to kindergarten, develop at a much more robust pace than at previously realized, and that development during those early years matters a lot in terms of their outcome.

And stories like Mosby’s offer anecdotal evidence rebutting the notion that adults are no longer predisposed to learning beyond the traditional school years. She was almost 30 years old when she embraced the value of learning and went back to school. “The thing that surprised me most,” she said, “was finding out I wasn’t stupid.”

Aspects of Learning

Learning involves a multitude of techniques and strategies. But several principles tend to be at work when learning happens best.

It is important, for example, that:

- People are able to see that what they are learning has significance in their lives.
- They have opportunities to learn with others, are able to discuss and question openly, and are offered support and resources to help them gain a sense of competence.
- They learn within the context of community.
- They come to embrace the notion that they are learning all the time, in different contexts and not only in formal classrooms.
- They are acknowledged as having unique learning profiles and are able to approach learning in their own style.

Emotional well-being is another important factor. Learning requires a certain degree of focus and those who are under stress, are frustrated or distracted are at a disadvantage.

One Woman’s Journey

Eugenia Mosby’s journey from high school drop-out to working professional and avid learner is an example of how many of those factors influence successful learning.

The first program she approached for help in earning a GED greeted her with a list of requirements, forms, and inattention. Discouraged, she did nothing. Worried that her new- found

desire to learn would soon fade, she placed a call to an Even Start program, whose brochure she had discovered at her welfare office.

“I called and they were, like, ready,” she said. “There weren’t really any barriers stopping me from getting what I wanted, as long as I was serious about it. Anything that could have been a barrier – I don’t have a ride, I don’t have anyone to watch my kids, which are big things for single parents – would be taken care of. All I had to do was seize the moment, and that’s what I did.”

Even Start staff showed her patience, she said. She was offered plenty of one-on-one learning with instructors, especially in mathematics, her weakness. She was able to learn in ways that respected her own style. “What made it comfortable was that there wasn’t any pressure put on me to meet somebody else’s expectations. It was always whether I was satisfied with my performance that determined whether I moved on.”

That changed when she entered community college. She no longer controlled the pace. She made the adjustment, in most classes. But she ran into trouble in math. “It wasn’t that I wasn’t learning, the pace was just so much faster. By the time I would understand what we were doing, the class was already on something new.”

She found herself on the brink of failing math. With her degree in jeopardy, she turned to relationships she had built at Even Start. “I was use to the patience and one-on-one I got there. So, I went back to my Even Start teacher, and she would tutored me in math.”

Mosby passed math. In May 1999, she was graduated from community college with an associate degree in the Science of Youth and Adults.

The unsung heroes in her story, she said, are the friends and staff she leaned on at her family center. “It was always, you know, ‘You can do it,’” she said. “And if I missed the bus to school, it didn’t matter if it was the van driver or a staff person, somebody made sure I got there. No matter what I needed, it was never too big of a problem for them to help me.”

Community Role

Communities can be vehicles for promoting and supporting learning throughout life. In Mosby’s case, the community, and the relationships she built within it, were critical to her success.

The idea of community-based education is not new. “Community schools,” for example, call for partnerships among educators, families, human service agencies, and others to improve children’s education, and use public schools as hub for services and supports.

A community-wide approach to life-long learning, however, is relatively uncharted territory. Communities won’t find any tried-and-true template for such initiatives. But research suggests several principles and characteristics worth considering.

The overall goal is not to teach or to learn specific skills, but to promote and embrace attitudes that place a high value on learning and reinforce key aspects of learning, such as curiosity, competent problem solving, and the willingness to question.

“If you work to embed that mindset within the community, it becomes a way of being and a way of thinking over time,” said Sprague. “It is linked to relationships. You have to have a connection so learning becomes a shared value. Then, no matter where people are on that continuum, they are respected for what they know.”

It is also important to recognize that learning takes place in many contexts, formal classrooms as well as informal settings.

People who learn throughout their lifetime learn at home. They learn in formal settings, such as elementary, middle and high schools, trade and vocational schools, community colleges, and universities. They learn in non-formal settings, which include YMCAs, religious institutions, libraries, museums, and community-based organizations, such as family support centers.

Other principles to build around include several that are familiar to family support. For example:

- Community members are best served when their capacity to help themselves is encouraged and developed.
- People are more likely to take advantage of services, programs, and opportunities when they are located close to or in their neighborhoods.
- Organizations and agencies can meet their own goals and better serve children and families by collaborating with those working toward common goals.
- Successful initiatives acknowledge and embrace the diversity of neighborhoods.
- Community initiatives work best when they listen to people who live in the neighborhoods and give them a voice in shaping and implementing solutions.

Family Support’s Assets

A starting point for a community-wide approach to life-long learning might be conversations among members of the community to determine, for example, how people view learning, what they need, and, if they are parents, what they want for their children.

Family support centers are well-suited to organize such conversations, which might begin with participants of a family center, then expand to include others in the community.

Family support in Allegheny County also has nearly 10 years experience with a strengths-based approach to working with families.

“Family support centers creating a climate in which people are valued for their strengths and what they already know is very consistent with this approach to learning,” said Sprague.

“It is not, ‘I have something you need to know.’ It is, ‘What do you already know that is useful and meaningful that new information can build on?’ How do we take what you already know and create ways for you to share it with others, so learning then becomes integrated within the culture of the organization and its outlook.”

Embracing life-long learning as a community-wide initiative will require patience. The road is uncharted. But the benefits are clear. “I’m still on a journey,” Mosby said. “I’m learning all the time and because of that, I’m not just surface-existing anymore. I have a whole different perspective. If my house burns down and I lose everything, I know that I could start over again. With knowledge, I don’t have to be hopeless.”

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