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Fractals and Communities of Practice: What can Education Learn from Federations of the Urban Poor?

Between climate change, large scale displacement, dysfunctional urbanization and other forms of dispossession, many households and communities face high levels of risk and insecurity. If we are to manage the many forces of dispossession and uncertainty, we agree on the need for engaged citizens – and students. We acknowledge that education is fundamental – for good or bad, the way children learn at school is often a fractal replica of how their society functions and the values it considers important. In many places, this includes the process by which education filters out the brightest and the most privileged, leaving the rest functionally unprepared to deal with mounting challenges, and depriving their societies of the optimal capability of all members.

We know how large the gap can be between ideals and practice. Schooling may be predicated on philosophies of all children as engaged active learners. But too often “active learning” ends up meaning, at best, a lot of activities, not a lot of truly engaged minds. “Communities of practice” among teachers, however effective in generating mutual support, may be poorly reflected in classroom practice. Community development, similarly, is often based on ideologies of inclusiveness and participation – yet “participation” too often means a shallow top down process, often hijacked by the most vocal and influential community members, failing to meet the needs of the poorest and reinforcing existing hierarchies. Without becoming truly a part of the culture, whether of a school, a community or the wider society, these kinds of processes (active learning, communities of practice, participation, community-driven development) can be just thin distortions of the deeper engagement envisioned. Inclusive, collaborative engagement in problem solving is hard. People in general do not bother if there is a more direct streamlined alternative to reaching the objective.

This discussion will look, at the community level, at a social movement and a process that has managed in its own messy way to grapple with these distortions, using the physical environment as an entry point, and providing the basis for communities to address their most basic needs in negotiation with local government. This model provides a valuable point of reference for discussing the kind of change in culture needed to make “communities of practice” a fractal pattern that describes our schools as well as the communities they are rooted in.