Re-envisioning Social Studies with the Community School Model of Elsie Ripley Clapp

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Given the current marginalization of social studies education in schools, this paper explores the social studies centered community-school model of Elsie Ripley Clapp, who was a significant educator, scholar, and leader within progressive education. A former graduate assistant of John Dewey, Clapp put progressive pedagogical ideology into practice in the 1920s and 1930s through her curriculum development and administrative leadership in rural schools such as: the Ballard School in Kentucky and the Arthurdale Schools in West Virginia. She developed a social studies focused, experiential curriculum rooted in her vision of schools as democratic spaces. First, biographical information about Clapp’s life, educational experiences, and commitment to social justice is provided. Second, Clapp’s community school model at the Ballard School is explored. The model, which united people across social class and centered on local history, geography, and economics, provides implications for how we might re-envision our current approaches to social studies education.

Keywords: Elsie Ripley Clapp, Democratic Education, Civic Engagement, Community School, Progressive Education, Social Education, Rural Education, John Dewey

Introduction

A socially-functioning school has, therefore, not only to claim as its problems the conditions in the community affecting residents and therefore children, not only to participate in these, and itself to supply where lacking health, social, and recreational agencies or to foster and use in connection with these, but also to interpret its teaching job as the learning of socially functioning subject matter. This enterprise is as demanding as any civic participation may be. (Clapp, 1933, pp. 286-287)

Elsie Ripley Clapp, one of the most significant female leaders in progressive education, worked as a teacher, administrator, author, and editor of the national journal Progressive Education. A graduate student, and later, influential colleague of John Dewey at Columbia University, Elsie Ripley Clapp sought to put into practice progressive pedagogical ideology through her curriculum development and leadership in rural schools. Clapp aimed to specifically enact her vision for schools to become beacons of community, spaces where youth learned and experienced democratic practice. During the Great Depression era, Clapp made her vision for the community school to fruition. Clapp created a community-based school while Principal of Ballard School in Jefferson County, Kentucky, from 1929-1934, and later refined her model while Principal of the Arthurdale Schools, part of the first federal homestead project of the New Deal led by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, near Reedsville, West Virginia, from 1934-1936.

This article explores Elsie Ripley Clapp’s treatment of social studies themes and topics within her community-school model at Ballard School. Her work at Ballard is of particular focus because it is here that she develops the essence of her community-school model that she later replicates at the Arthurdale Schools. While at Ballard, Clapp placed democratic citizenship
development and locally based social studies content at the heart of her curriculum. Primary sources such as: Elsie Ripley Clapp’s 1939 book, *Community Schools in Action*, and in her 1952 book titled, *The Use of Resources in Education*, are central in this study. Additionally, articles she published in *Progressive Education* are used. However, secondary sources such as Sam F. Stack, Jr.’s *Elsie Ripley Clapp (1879-1965): Her Life and the Community School*, are examined. First, the current marginalization of social studies education in the United States is briefly explored followed by the early life and social justice commitments of Elsie Ripley Clapp. Second, description of Clapp’s pedagogical practice and leadership within her community school model at Ballard is provided, prompting a re-envisioned approach to social studies scholarship and practice.

**Marginalization of Social Studies Education**

Social studies has long stood at the core of American education with its emphasis of democratic citizenship development and thematic content strands such as history, geography, cultural diversity, government, and economics. Social studies education, however, in many schools across the nation is currently under siege. The drive for increased standardized test scores prompted largely by the *No Child Left Behind* Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) passed by the United States Congress in 2001 has resulted in the narrowing of curriculum, particularly in elementary schools. In an effort to raise student test scores and subsequently to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), school districts have begun to focus instruction on the specific subject areas emphasized on standardized tests, specifically language arts and mathematics. This emphasis has led subject areas such as social studies to become marginalized (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Cayot-Serriere, & Stewart 2008, 2011).

Despite social studies education being considered a centerpiece for the development of active, democratic citizens, this subject is virtually non-existent in many Kindergarten-6 classrooms (McMurrer, 2008). Some administrators in schools in danger of not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) have overtly demanded teachers eliminate instructional time for social studies (Montgomery, 2009). Although the marginalization of social studies is taking place across the nation, it is an especially daunting reality in schools struggling to meet Adequate Yearly Progress, which receive pressure to either increase student test scores or close.

Regardless of the current status of social studies education, some educators aim to fight its marginalization, attempting to anchor it as a key element of the classroom curriculum. These teachers refuse to be de-skilled and continue to develop creative, inquiry-based, hands-on social studies learning engagements for their students (Goodman, 2006). Such teachers are using role-playing, primary resources, artifacts, children’s literature, and the arts to support their social studies teaching. They are also encouraging students to become civically engaged through community-based endeavors such as service-learning (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009; Christie, Montgomery & Staudt, 2012). With dwindling institutional support for social studies education and the drive for standards-based curriculum, a long-term commitment to developing and implementing intellectually-rich social studies lessons proves challenging for teachers. In turn, social studies, in many classrooms, often is entirely textbook-centered or appears haphazardly within enriched reading or writing lessons (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Cayot-Serriere, and Stewart, 2008). Rather than consistently engaging students in community-based learning that not only addresses social studies content and themes, but also fosters student’s development of a
democratic commitment to one another, social studies in our current educational climate may seem largely disconnected to students’ lives.

Given the current status of social studies, we must look to the past to explore alternatives, finding where we have been and seeking new possibilities for the discipline’s future. The work of Elsie Ripley Clapp, a progressive education visionary who brought the community school model to fruition through her work at the Ballard School in rural Kentucky, and later at the Arthurdale Schools in rural West Virginia, provides such an alternative. As both a scholar and practitioner, she pushed the boundaries and goals of progressive education to make schools the beacon of a community.

The Roots of the Community School Model

Elsie Ripley Clapp, who focused on helping students in economically vulnerable rural areas develop a democratic commitment to one another, was born to an affluent family in Brooklyn Heights, New York on November 13, 1879. As a young child, Clapp was sheltered and lived a life of privilege. Her mother was a talented pianist and her father was a successful financial investor who worked for the family iron business. Although the family experienced near financial devastation in the 1890s depression, they were able to send Clapp to elite schools on scholarships (Stack, 2004). Clapp attended the private Packer Collegiate Institute and later attended Vassar, which aimed to prepare women to the same degree as men in higher education. Although Clapp enjoyed her coursework at Vassar, she experienced health problems and lost her scholarship funding. Later, with financial support from her uncle, Clapp graduated with a degree in English from Barnard College.

Clapp began her educational career as an English teacher at Brooklyn Heights Seminary while completing her bachelor’s degree at Barnard. During this time, she took Master’s degree level credits in Philosophy and classes at Teachers College, Columbia University, which was just beginning to professionalize the field of education. In these classes, Clapp met lifelong friends William H. Kirkpatrick and John Dewey, and later earned a Master of Arts in Philosophy at Columbia University, writing her thesis on creative imagination.

Realizing she was interested in doctoral studies, faculty at Columbia encouraged Clapp to apply for a fellowship, becoming the only woman given such funding. Although Clapp had taken numerous classes with Dewey and assisted him with his Foundations of Method and Social Aspects of the School Curriculum classes, she pursued a Ph.D. in English because of her teaching experience in the English field. During graduate study at Columbia, John Dewey greatly influenced Clapp's’s development of her own philosophy of education rooted in American pragmatism. Biographer Sam F. Stack, Jr. writes:

From 1907-1912 Elsie was exposed to Dewey’s central ideas about desire, thought, reflection, knowledge, and judgment. All these relate to his concepts of community, democracy, and education – important ideas in her later work … Elsie Clapp considered John Dewey to be the most important intellectual influence on her life” (Stack, 2004, 77). Dewey’s emerging vision for education in a democracy and how education could support citizenship development emerged in conjunction with his work with Clapp, both of whom recognized that the traditional school model did not support a sense of community. Dewey respected Clapp enough to give her credit in his preface of Democracy & Education, thanking “Miss Elsie Ripley Clapp for many suggestions and criticisms” (Dewey, 1916, p. v).
Despite Clapp’s intellectual engagement in her doctoral studies, she never completed her degree upon walking out of her oral exams when political issues among faculty arose. Clapp instead returned to teaching and her approach to education was deeply inspired, first in Charleston, South Carolina and next as an English teacher at Jersey City High School in New Jersey. The issues of racism in South Carolina and large numbers of immigrant families in Jersey City provided her with rich experience. Prompted by her work with immigrant youth at Jersey City High School, Clapp became highly involved in social welfare issues in New York City. She first became a member of the Committee of Children in the 1913 Paterson Silk Workers Strike. This role required she visit the homes of families in New York City who had offered to care for the children of workers on strike. In an effort to find fit placements, Clapp became very familiar with the Lower East Side and tenement housing in New York City. She also taught 60 Italian immigrant children in a temporary school in the upper level of St. Mark’s church. During this time, Clapp became increasingly aware of injustice and class conflict, and began working on behalf of social welfare causes, children’s rights, and women’s suffrage. She marched in the violent March 3, 1913 women’s suffrage parade in Washington, D.C. She went to court to defend a friend for her birth control clinic advocacy, picketed with garment girls, and spent time in women’s court and children’s court to better understand white slave traffic (i.e., prostitution). Such efforts resulted in Clapp believing the key to social, political, and economic reform lie in education. She had experienced first-hand the plight of the unprotected, oppressed, and voiceless; but she also experienced the power of a group of people with a shared interest working together for the common good, both of which shaped her later Community School model (Stack, 2004).

Throughout the late 1910s and early 1920s, Clapp became the Assistant Principal of Brooklyn Heights Seminary. In 1923, Clapp accepted a position teaching twelve-year-olds at the well known and respected City and Country School founded by Caroline Pratt. At the City and Country School, where Pratt envisioned the school as a community committed to social reform Clapp was finally immersed in progressive teaching methods. She worked with renowned progressive educator Lucy Sprague Mitchell and developed curriculum that was child-centered, arts-integrated, and inquiry-based (Stack, 2004). Teachers College faculty came to observe Clapp’s classroom and two mornings a week Clapp worked with Dewey to assist him with his classes. Although she only worked at the City and Country School for a year, her experiences there influenced her as a scholar-practitioner in her future work. Though she was able to connect with professional women on progressive methods such as integrating the arts, music, and play into the curriculum, Clapp differed from school leaders about the larger purpose of the school. She believed the school should become the center of community life, with high levels of parent involvement. Additionally, the City and Country School historically drew from the children of the intelligentsia of Greenwich Village, exemplifying the belief at the time that progressive methods were only possible and successful in elitist, urban private schools. Regardless of her differences with Caroline Pratt, Clapp noted her colleague Lucy Sprague Mitchell’s important influence on her beliefs about early childhood education, the arts, and the child’s role in larger society. Clapp maintained close contact with Mitchell through her career, and later Mitchell even served on the National Advisory Board to the Arthurdale Schools that Clapp led (Stack, 2004).
In 1924, upon the encouragement of Dewey, Clapp accepted the role of Principal of the Rosemary Junior School, an elite female college preparatory school in Greenwich, Connecticut. There, Clapp worked diligently to get parents on board in transforming the traditional school into a school centered on progressive curriculum and pedagogy. Clapp’s leadership at Rosemary Junior School became well known in progressive circles, with Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker writing about it in their text, *The Child Centered School* (1928) In collaboration with the teachers, she wrote a bulletin about the principles of progressive education. Topics included disrupting gender barriers and hands-on learning opportunities. She and the teachers also began publishing articles regularly in the journal *Progressive Education* and in *The New Era*, the journal of progressive education in Europe. She encouraged teachers at the school to emphasize the arts for she believed they were inherently democratic and offered students an opportunity for self-expression and community building.

Although she was pleased with the progressive teaching at the Rosemary Junior School, she continually thought the school needed to do a better job of aligning with the community at large. Specifically, Clapp thought that it was necessary to bring progressive methods to schools to the majority of Americans attended, not just elite schools in the Northeast (Stack, 2004). In 1929, Clapp had the opportunity to make these ideas a reality through leading the Ballard School in Louisville, Kentucky. Arthur and Jane Allen, parents who played a leadership role at the Ballard School, invited Clapp to visit the George Rogers Clark Ballard Memorial School in Kentucky to give them advice on how to reform the school. Although the Allen’s conducted numerous interviews with principal candidates in New York, they decided to ask Clapp to come and lead Ballard School. She was nervous about the challenge, but realized this was an opportunity for her to put her vision of a community-centered school into practice in a rural area serving students predominately struggling with poverty. Dewey encouraged Clapp to take the position and when the formal offer was made, Clapp accepted and embarked upon the development of a school fully rooted in the community it served.

**The Community Model: The George Rogers Clark Ballard Memorial School**

A community school forgoes its separateness. It is influential because it belongs to its people. They share its ideals and its work. It takes from them and gives to them. There are no bounds as far as I can see to what it could accomplish in social reconstruction if it had enough wisdom and insight and devotion and energy. It demands all these for changes in living and learning of people are not produced by imparting information about different conditions or by gathering statistical data about what exists, but by creating with people, by people, for people (Clapp 1933a, 128).

The George Rogers Clark Ballard Memorial School was located a few miles outside of Louisville, Kentucky in a rural, hilly wooded area near creeks, meadows, and the Ohio River. Founded in 1909 by Mr. and Mrs. Thurston Ballard, the school, which served grades Kindergarten-10, was primarily financed by wealthy local families who, instead of sending their children to private schools, wanted to create and sustain a local school for the families in the area. Consequently, when Clapp arrived to lead the Ballard School, 75% of the students were children of small farmers and farm tenants, while only 25% were from prosperous families.
(Stack, 2004). As Clapp wrote in an article for *Progressive Education* titled, “A Rural Community School in Kentucky:”

> In this rural country school the children of prosperous parents living on large farms and the estates and also children of families living in small farm houses, cottages, and tenant houses have gone to school here together for the past twenty years. The school is, therefore, an experiment in democracy” (Clapp, 1933, p. 128).

The Ballard School, thus, was seemingly poised for Clapp to create a community-centered curriculum in a rural school centered on “the development of socially minded people” (Clapp, 1933a, p. 287).

Clapp’s approach to charting a new course in progressive education by facilitating the community school model at Ballard School is examined in the following sections. Upon initial analysis of Clapp’s 1939 book *Community Schools in Action* and her 1952 book *The Use of Resources in Education*, in addition to articles she published in *Progressive Education*, it is clear she put social studies topics such as history, geography, and economics at the heart of the school’s curriculum. Upon further analysis, however, it is increasingly apparent that Clapp’s community school model actively addressed the deeper goals of social studies education centered on social justice and democratic citizenship development. The key tenet of her community school model was Connecting Active Citizens and Community-Centered Curriculum, which supported the civicly-rich, participatory, community-centered curriculum, will be presented in the following two thematic sections.

### Connecting Active Citizens

Clapp’s vision for Ballard School centered on her belief that a school is, and should become, a community enterprise. She wrote, “The school is naturally a center for community life – a neutral place, a place concerned with the welfare of young people and the conditions that affect their lives” (Clapp, 1933a, 283). Clapp, however, did not believe a school and its staff could ameliorate the challenges facing a community, but rather believed a school served as a space for cooperative civic engagement and action among teachers, parents, students, and community members. Her concept of a community school involved “shared responsibility, the community for the school, and the school for the community” (Clapp, 1933a, p. 283). The school and community, according to Clapp, were not isolated entities, but shared common goals and a collective identity. As Clapp wrote, “We – the families and the teachers and the children share belief in the School’s work and ideals” (Clapp, 1939, p. 61).

A common early goal of the emerging Ballard School community centered on improving the physical and social well being of community members. Working cooperatively as civic agents under Clapp’s leadership, the Ballard School community quickly became a trusted space that served more than just the academic needs of its students. The Ballard community members mobilized to start multiple health-related initiatives because, as Clapp wrote, “the health needs of our children were urgent” (Clapp, 1933, p. 124). Beginning in the first school year of her tenure, Ballard students received full physicals from a local pediatrician, using Clapp’s office and later the school gymnasium as exam rooms. Families became highly involved, with local mothers helping at the examinations and a local dentist offering his services. Follow-up appointments with the county nurse and Department of Health were made for children who needed immediate care and, with parental consent, teachers and parents drove children to Louisville clinics for
vision, dental, and psychiatric appointments. Students and the Parent Teacher Association worked together to raise funds to pay for doctors from the University of Louisville to later support the health initiatives (Clapp, 1939).

During these physical examinations, it became clear that many students were undernourished and hungry. The school community decided to work together under Clapp’s leadership to take action on this issue, with daily nutritious hot lunches being planned, prepared, and served by the parents. Families were asked to pay what they could afford, with several families contributing food items instead of monetary payment for the program. Morning snacks sponsored by the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) were also offered. A mother whose family ran a local dairy farm regularly donated extra milk to the school. A group of mothers mobilized to send homemade soup to school daily for distribution to children who were sick or struggled with undernourishment. The school began pooling weekly grocery money from families and going to wholesale markets in Louisville to buy food in bulk, in addition to a weekly co-operative where families could exchange meat, eggs, bread, and other staple items. Fathers in the community who were talented gardeners helped start a school garden program and distributed seeds to children to start their own gardens at home. Student work connecting to the gardening and 4-H activities started to be showcased at a school-based county fair open to the entire county, the proceeds of which supported the school (Clapp, 1939).

Ballard School became a space that, in addition to offering preventative health, hygiene, and cooking classes for students and families, connected citizens through recreation and entertainment. As Clapp wrote, “From the outset we felt the need of using the school as a center of recreation and entertainment” (Clapp, 1933, p. 125). Physical education activities were offered to both boys and girls, an official basketball league was started, and events such as an annual harvest supper, spring fair, school plays, and class assemblies were held. Parents began hosting a weekly movie night at the school for area families. As 100 or more people attended the movie each week, another parent began a fiction lending library program on movie nights for adults in the community who lacked access to library services. At all of these events, parents, teachers, and older students served as hosts and hostesses.

Many of the teachers at Ballard School, several of whom had years of experience with progressive methodology, were not originally from Kentucky. They, instead, were hired because local teachers turned down teaching positions at Ballard due to the seemingly risky curricular endeavor. Despite being outsiders initially, under Clapp’s leadership, the teachers became active participants and integral members of the community-at-large. As Clapp wrote, “The teachers are residents, neighbors. Their life is part of the community … the work of the school with the children—health matters, social matters—it takes them everywhere, into homes, into contact with people of every kind. The parents are most hospitable and they know that the teachers will care and help if help is needed” (Clapp, 1933a, p. 285).

Regarding the teachers, “We live our lives in the community. We belong there. The work at School is part of our living. Our living is part of the school” (Clapp, 1939, p. 61). Although lacking local roots, the teachers became active, engaged community members with their engagement reciprocated by families who volunteered time, donated supplementary funds, farm products, and clothing, as well as helping the school make connections with area social agencies (Clapp, 1933a). The school, as Clapp envisioned, became a place where teachers and families worked together for the betterment of the community. As Clapp wrote of the teachers’ and
parents’ collaborative efforts, “as neighbors and friends, we all are participating in a community enterprise, centering at the school but stretching out on every side” (Clapp 1933a, p. 285). With Clapp’s leadership, Ballard School embodied participatory social studies education in action, with civically-engaged democratic citizens at the heart of her Community School Model.

**Community-Centered Curriculum**

What is meant by social study is study for enterprises essentially social in character of facts and subjects required for their execution. In a school of a community, a socially functioning school, the plan is to have educative experiences that will direct children’s growth and enable them to participate intelligently and actively in the life of their community. The school uses the life at the school, the shared experiences and learning that results from them, as a means of interpreting to the children the meaning of their lives and of working together for common ends” (Clapp 1939, 48).

When Elsie Ripley Clapp began leading the Ballard School, she noted that the students were academically behind, had poor attendance, were largely disengaged in the learning process, and were not invested in the school community. While the collaboration and civic engagement of teachers and parents in cultivating a school community offered a model of democratic citizenship for students, Clapp and the teachers went a step further and deliberately designed the school curriculum to promote a community-centered philosophy. Clapp recognized she needed to connect the curriculum to the children’s lives, and could best do so by making social studies the anchor of the curriculum. She and the teachers connected the grade-level topics of study and inquiry to the local community, and subsequently to the immediate lives and surroundings of the students at Ballard. While integrating subjects such as language arts, mathematics, science, and the arts into social studies by focusing on how these subjects are inherently social and involve modes of communication, they used social studies themes such as history, geography, and economics to help students connect learning and their community and, in turn, to one another.

At Ballard School, students in various grades studied local social studies topics and themes. First-grade students, for example, visited local dairy farms and grew a class garden with crops such as corn, oats, and barley (Clapp, 1952). Second-grade students studied a typical Kentucky village and worked together to construct a model village that included houses, a grocery store, post office, farmhouse, bank, and a school (Clapp, 1952). Third-grade students learned about indigenous people who had lived in the area and created accurate dwelling spaces, tools, food, and artwork that these groups of people would have used and created in the past (Clapp, 1952). The fourth-grade students studied Kentucky pioneer life and built a lean-to, visited local cabins and forts, participated in weaving, and created dramatic performances of topics related to Kentucky history (Clapp, 1952). Fifth grade studied transportation development over time and connected their work to forms of transportation used in the past, as well as the transportation they observed regularly on the Ohio River (Clapp, 1952). Sixth grade focused on the exploration and settlement of the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys by Europeans. The seventh, eighth, and ninth grades focused initially on the geologic, agricultural, and industrial conditions that shaped Kentucky’s development, with the seventh- and eighth-grade students working together to build a log cabin for the school to use in a nearby quarry (Clapp, 1952). Each of these upper grade levels, however, later decided to pursue more specific interests, with
seventh-grade students deciding to delve into the history and culture of American Indians, creating a Pueblo village. Eighth-grade students started a newspaper titled, “Kentucky News,” and ninth-grade students decided to study more about the history of Greece and Rome, in addition to creating a model of the Parthenon, topics that aligned with Louisville High School programs of study (Clapp, 1952). While the majority of these topics of study have clear connections to the history, geography, and economics of the local area, it is important to point out that in studying these topics, teachers at Ballard School worked with community members to connect with and utilize local resources such as museums, farms, points of historical interest, and topographical features such as creeks, forests, and the Ohio riverfront.

Although the topics of study for each grade level placed social studies content and themes at the center of the curriculum, supporting students’ development of a deeper connection to their local history and heritage, the topics and methods by which these themes were taught aimed to promote democratic citizenship. In each of the grade-level areas of study, students had to learn to work together as a team, a community of citizens committed to achieving a common goal. Through these learning endeavors, Clapp and the teachers at Ballard School sought “the development of socially minded people” (Clapp, 1933a, p. 287), namely students who care for one another, show compassion, and demonstrate empathy. Overall, through these learning engagements, students learned to work together, communicate, make decisions, and become a community of learners who understood democratic citizenship in the present for the future. While Clapp and the teachers at Ballard School did not push students to be critical or indoctrinate them to change the social order, as George Counts had called for, they did something that is perhaps more important: they engaged students in the tough work of community learning and community building, thus demonstrating participatory social studies in action.

At the Heart of the Matter

Analysis of these sources suggests while at the Ballard School, Elsie Ripley Clapp collaborated with teachers, students, parents, and community members to facilitate her vision of a Community School Model, an educational environment where all involved learned that they have a responsibility to others, as well as how to be more compassionate and cooperative, as opposed to competitive. The school curriculum cultivated a community of mutual respect, tolerance, and care among the students and community in an effort to develop democratic citizenship. By emphasizing local history, among other themes, and utilizing local resources within the curriculum at Ballard School, Elsie Ripley Clapp put social studies at the center, using it as a focal point for student learning. As opposed to the current status of social studies, which in many elementary classrooms might be haphazardly addressed through a literacy-centered lesson, Clapp used community-based social studies as the anchor of the curriculum.

Elsie Ripley Clapp’s educational leadership, extended career, and publications warrant a plethora of scholarship. Considering the current status of social studies in classrooms across the United States, analysis of Clapp’s pedagogical practices regarding social studies themes and content at the Ballard School can support a re-envisioning of social studies. Through a locally rooted social studies curriculum paired with service-learning students can participate in community-based learning like that advocated by Clapp, learning what it means to be civically engaged and committed to the well being of one another (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009). Instead
of pushing aside the development of a vibrant community of citizens, especially among our most economically vulnerable students, we might instead look to Elsie Ripley Clapp and once again place a community-based social studies education at the heart of the American educational experience.

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