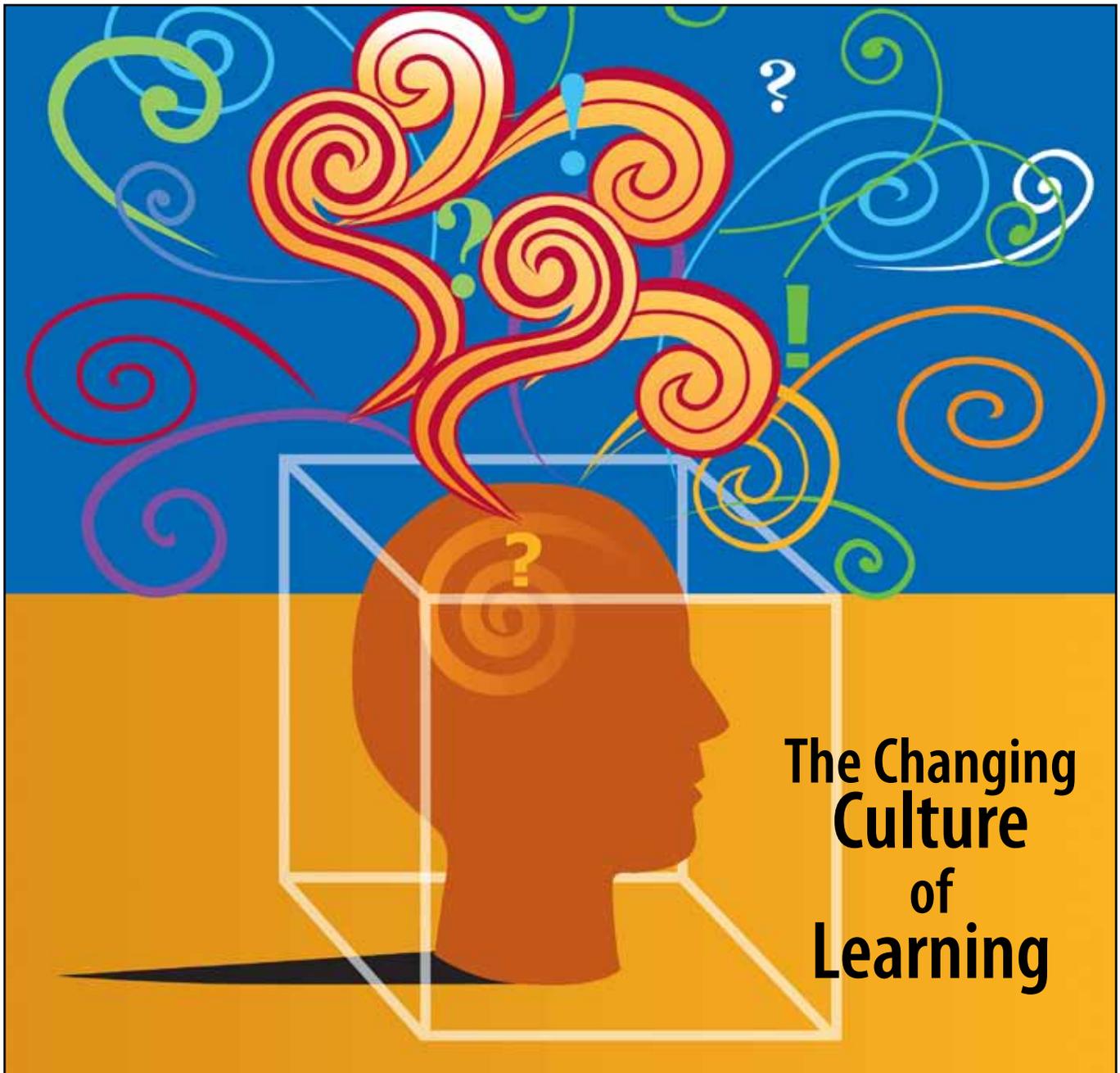


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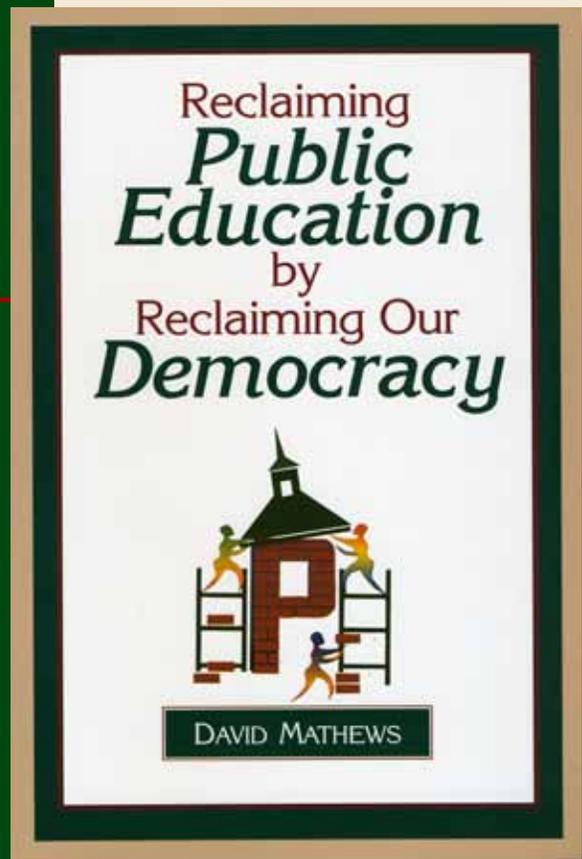
**The Changing
Culture
of
Learning**

Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy

By David Mathews

In his most recent book, Kettering Foundation president David Mathews considers what citizens and educators alike want from public education and how they might come closer to getting it. Mathews examines the obstacles that block them, beginning with significant differences in the ways that citizens see problems of education and how professional educators and policymakers talk about them. Discussions of accountability, the achievement gap, vouchers, and the like don't always resonate with people's real concerns. Mathews argues that this has resulted in a deep chasm between citizens and the schools that serve them.

Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy updates Kettering's research findings, restates and expands on ideas raised in Mathews' earlier book, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* (Kettering Foundation Press, 1996), and adds material that illustrates how to build a public for public education.



Kettering Foundation Press | 2006
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The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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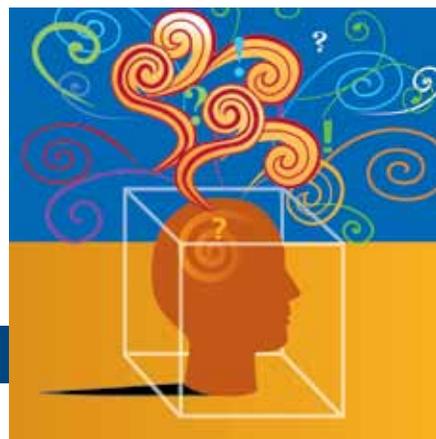
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Books Worth Reading

The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods

By John McKnight and Peter Block
Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2010
<http://www.abundantcommunity.com>

In their latest book, *The Abundant Community*, John McKnight and Peter Block team up to deliver a hearty dose of self-help for people in search of fulfilling community life. Organized into three sections, the book traces the decline of family and community in American society, identifies inherent capacities within neighborhoods that often go untapped, and suggests how to nurture and connect individual capacities to create the associations of public life. A sense of robust and capable citizenship is juxtaposed against a model of consumerism in which professional providers usurp the role of citizens.

The book follows the decline of community to a shift to a consumer-oriented economy in the early 20th century. This new economic order, combined with the increasing demand of large institutions for measurement and standardization, led to the gradual “outsourcing” of community functions (like caring for the elderly) to a growing army of social service professionals. The crisis in the American educational system is used to illustrate the limits of the consumer-oriented professions to fulfill community functions. The authors suggest that the “youth problem” is the result of leaving children’s development and education up to the schools—treating children as mere consumers of educational services without any real purpose

in the community. Citing a study in Chicago neighborhoods as a testament to the educative role of communities, researchers found that neighbors’ willingness to intervene when children misbehave is one of the most influential indicators of health and educational outcomes for children (19).

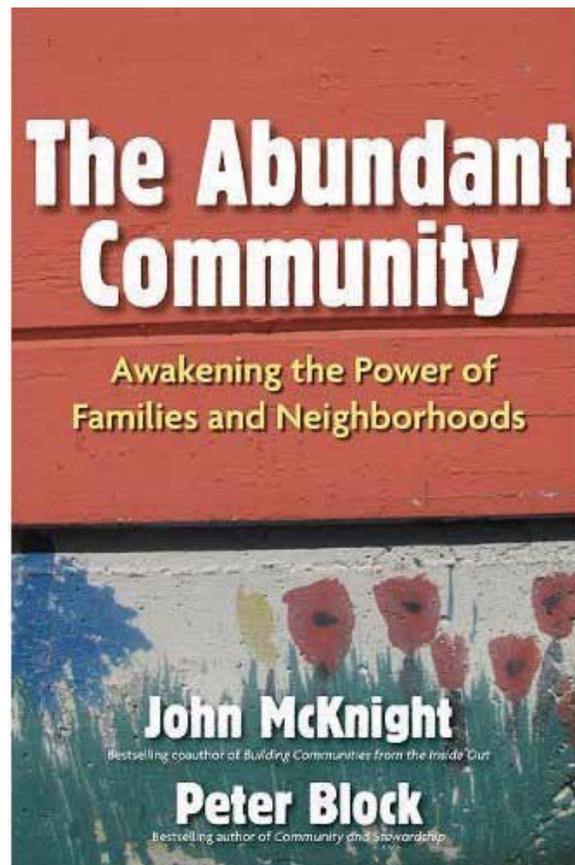
McKnight and Block make the case that professionalization has undermined the ability of families and communities to provide for their basic needs by defining ordinary life conditions as problems requiring expert solutions. In short, what families and communities used to do for themselves, is now provided by professionals, who cannot accommodate the idiosyncrasies inherent in individuals, families, and community life. This kind of consumerism threatens the bedrock of democracy—the capacity of citizens to govern themselves.

Against the demoralizing forces of professionalism and consumerism, McKnight and Block provide a strategy for creating an abundant, healthy public life. For clarity, they distinguish between the terms *association* (three or more people joined by choice and interest), *neighborhood* (the place where you live and sleep), and *community* (both a place and an experience of connectedness). A central concept throughout the book is “community competence”—the capacity of a place to fulfill its residents’ needs (5). People in a competent community believe they have the capacity and

responsibility to provide for themselves and their neighbors (66). The authors identify three community properties that create the conditions for community competence (67):

1. A focus on people’s gifts and capacities
2. The nurturing of associational life (the sharing and building of capacities)
3. An ethic of hospitality through the welcoming of strangers and outsiders

To start the process of creating community competence, citizens must identify and make visible the gifts and capacities of people in their neighborhoods. Expanding the focus on individual gifts, the authors provide a list of capacities that are key for the community as a whole, highlighting both the prosperity and the limitations of community life. Two of the capacities identified, “generosity” and “cooperation,” are positioned in opposition to the prevailing theories of resource scar-



Books Worth Reading

city and zero-sum economics and are built on the premise that communities can be abundantly resourceful. Yet the capacities of “fallibility” and “mystery” emphasize acceptance of the limitations, trade-offs, and uncertainty inherent in community decision making (84-91). It is noted that the culture of a place can greatly affect the development of such capacities. The authors observe that competent communities have certain cultural traits—treating *time* as if there is plenty, allowing space for *reflection*, and valuing *storytelling* that creates a collective narrative (92-95). At its core, “the culture of community is initiated by people who value each other’s gifts and are seriously related to each other” (117).

Once a community’s capacities are made visible, citizens must then get to the essential task of connecting those capacities in associational life. Forming and strengthening associations gives communities the power to make decisions about what needs to be done and how to do it, and ultimately the power to join together to do what needs to be done. Association is fundamentally about choice. However, McKnight and Block point out that few associations come together for the explicit reason of doing social good, but that social good is often a byproduct of association. In other words, associations are necessary but not sufficient to create community competence. Rather, a few key people, “community connectors,” must act as catalysts to connect local associations in a way that creates a forum to surface the interests and problems of the neighborhood as a whole.

The book deals with issues of difference through the concept of “hospitality” (the third property of community competence). *Hospitality* is defined as the welcoming of “strangers” and “outsiders” both within and outside the community. The welcoming of strangers and openness to difference expands a community’s inventory of capacities and is therefore a source of resiliency and learning. In the last section of the book, Henri Nouwen

articulates hospitality as a kind of free space:

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness—not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs; speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations (113).

The authors suggest that this friendly ease grows out of gift-centered associations that build trust and friendship and ultimately confidence in one’s community. Whereas a community characterized by fear and insecurity feels threatened by outsiders, a confident community’s hospitality toward outsiders is its signature feature.

McKnight and Block kick off their discussion of hospitality by contrasting their approach to the community organizing of Saul Alinsky. Whereas traditional community organizing develops a common cause among residents by identifying a common enemy and developing an opposition, McKnight and Block advocate for organizing that is more “relationship-based” and in line with the ethic of hospitality. “Bringing people together against an outsider is the opposite of hospitality” (78). Here *outsider* is being used to represent powerful interests that are perceived as being at odds with the community’s interests, however, the existence of these perceptions, or the reality they may reflect is never discussed. In an expanded discussion, the terms *outsiders* and *strangers* represent marginal members and those outside the community. They argue that people who are marginalized and labeled by their deficiencies often have capacities that go untapped, and they suggest the surest way to manage resident deficiencies is to integrate them more fully into the life of the community (137-140). This seems like a reasonable strategy for the cases presented in the book (residents who are disabled, low-income, or immigrants), but does not offer any concrete guidance for dealing with the presence of hostile dynamics in community, like organized

crime, domestic violence, or persistent racism.

It is not clear whether a discussion of dealing with issues of contentious conflict is intentionally avoided or whether the reader is to assume that strangers and outsiders represent all potentially conflicting parties—both the powerful and the marginalized—for which hospitality is the recommended approach. If so, the choice to emphasize hospitality and to lump together any and all that fall outside of the community norm manages to circumvent the potentially polarizing discourse of power and difference that can deepen existing socioeconomic divides. In a way, McKnight and Block offer an alternative discourse of welcome and receptivity that doesn’t deny the realities of social and economic exclusion but averts the risk of reinforcing them—at least semantically.

Still, the book seems conspicuously incomplete without a practical strategy for dealing with conflict or a substantive discussion of the tensions inherent in building associations. At times, the authors’ zeal for close-knit community life comes across as overly romantic and may run the risk of oversimplifying the social and economic forces of modern life in order to stress the limitations of consumerism. The authors’ fierce belief in the capacity of community to heal and provide for itself runs in stark contrast to the predominant scholarship that finds communities almost incorrigibly deficient. And perhaps my hesitation with such an optimistic community narrative is symptomatic of the endemic cynicism of professionalism identified at the outset of the book. Indeed, it seems the power of *The Abundant Community* is not to provide an accurate, or even an entirely realistic account of community, but rather to inspire confidence—to shake the skeptical and guarded American citizen suffering from public paralysis out of the grip of consumerism and into action.

— Reviewed by Alexandra Robinson

Alexandra Robinson was a research assistant at the Kettering Foundation from 2008-2011.

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