

What Does the Community School Classroom Look Like? A Systematic Literature Review of Teaching and Learning in Community Schools¹

Introduction

Community school initiatives throughout the country champion services like healthcare, tutoring, and family engagement, focusing on external factors and opportunities as vehicles for improved learning. Yet, realizing the transformational potential of community schools requires a profound shift in the way students are learning in community school classrooms (Elmore, 2008). By shifting teaching practice, community schools can transform public schools into neighborhood hubs to promote student success, deeper social connections, and a vision for education that incorporates the voices of all students and families.

Classroom instruction has not always been a larger focus of modern community schools for a variety of reasons. Systemic social factors have created a never-ending stream of families and students facing urgent basic needs challenges, monopolizing time and attention. Additionally, mandatory and often high-stakes standardized testing has limited the skills, attitudes and knowledge that are considered valuable, and this leaves little space for schools to redesign curriculum (Apple, 2006; Ravitch, 2010). Schools are also increasingly seen as vehicles for workforce development in a globalized marketplace, which reinforces a narrow set of learning objectives. Moreover, the recent politicization of public-school curriculum has left some educators wary of straying too far from the pre-packaged instructional design.

In addition to these macro-structural issues, one practical reason why community school initiatives have not always focused on instruction is that a clear consensus on how teaching in the community school context *should* look different from instruction in a traditional school is only just emerging. Looking at what has been said about teaching and learning in a community school by practitioners and researchers, we hope to shine a light on teaching and learning in community schools. What follows is a review of community school literature that outlines five core elements of teaching and learning in community schools. We hope this will provide a helpful framework for community schools as they reimagine classroom learning at their sites.

Background

Ideas about classroom instruction have been a significant aspect of the community school movement's history. John Rogers traces this history in his article "Community Schools: Lessons from the Past and Present" (1998). The article identifies the move towards a "community curriculum" as one of the three core waves of community schools over the past 100 years. Rogers acknowledges the historical foundations of the community curriculum movement going back to the 1890s when many educators sought to integrate their instruction in the natural environment, taking students to local parks and outdoor spaces. The work of John Dewey in the early 1900s helped to elevate the idea of a progressive school curriculum that emphasized

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topics grounded in real-world community issues. The idea of a community-based curriculum was often directly connected to social action and “emerges from a belief that knowledge is dynamic and contextual” ([Olsen, as cited in Rogers, 1998, p. 11](#)).

That said, there have been modern community school initiatives that make teaching and learning a central focus, such as the University-Assisted Community School initiative supported by the University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia (Harkavy, Hartley, Hodges, & Weeks, 2013). In the past several years, there has been a resurgence in the attention paid to community school classroom instruction. In California, “Centering Community-Based Learning” is a core capacity-building strategy, embedded in the framework that guides the largest statewide implementation of community schools in the country ([State Transformational Assistance Center, n.d.-a](#)). Many individual community school initiatives in California have made instructional innovation a hallmark of their work. Anaheim Unified High School District, for example, has integrated project-based learning and civic engagement with its districtwide community school strategy. Students in Anaheim Union identify issues they care about in the local community and perform “soapbox speeches” (Pita, 2025). They also take on real-world advocacy. Students at Gilbert High School, for example, started a successful campaign to petition Orange County officials to change the local bus routes to better meet student needs (Lara, 2024). Anaheim also launched the Magnolia Agriscience Community Center, a two-and-a-half-acre farm at the Magnolia High School campus that gives students an opportunity for hands-on science instruction as well as an ongoing conduit for school-community partnership as the farm hosts events, contributes food to the community, engages with local higher education institutions like the

University of California-Irvine, and invites families and community members to participate in learning about nutrition and gardening (Magnolia Agriscience Community Center, n.d.; [Kopetman, 2021](#); [University of California, Irvine School of Education, n.d.](#); [Inside California Education, 2024](#); [KABC, 2023](#)). Lastly, the district has harnessed technology to give students virtual mediums for planning and digitally implementing creative ideas for improving environmental sustainability and community wellness throughout the City of Anaheim in partnership with Minecraft Education and the Schools Reinventing Cities Initiative ([AUHSD Communications, 2024](#); [C40 Reinventing Cities, n.d.](#); [AUHSD Communications, 2025](#)).

Los Angeles (LAUSD) is another California district that is centering innovative instructional practices in their community school approach. LAUSD passed a school board resolution in 2024 that launched the Supporting Meaningful Teaching and Learning Initiative (SMTLI), which supports a cohort of ten community schools to “commit to remodeling their existing instruction program to integrate culturally relevant curriculum, community- and project-based learning, and civic engagement” ([Los Angeles Unified School District, 2024](#)). Meanwhile, in San Diego, the contract between the San Diego Unified School District and San Diego Educators Association stipulates that the district will support “curriculum audits” in select community schools and provide “release time for educators to calibrate culturally-sustaining and community-based curriculum.” ([San Diego Unified School District & San Diego Education Association, 2023](#)). Mountain View School, a community school in San Diego, promotes the idea of “changemaking” as core to its curriculum and school philosophy. The school’s Changemakers PBL Project is an interdisciplinary opportunity for “building academic skills by facilitating the exploration of real-world issues,

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understanding their causes, and taking action” ([Pérez-Swanson & Ruiz, 2025](#)).

In Maryland, where half of the state’s schools are now community schools, the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future legislation that provides funding for most of the state’s community schools emphasizes serving students in concentrated poverty but does not contain significant language relating to the instructional components of community schools. Nevertheless, there are examples of Maryland community schools that have shifted teaching and learning to center community. At Benjamin Franklin High School in Baltimore City, for example, science teacher Albina Joy rebuilt her curriculum to focus on community wellness. Joy’s students partnered with Towson University and other community allies to have her students study the water and air quality in their neighborhood. This project led to advocacy to stop the development of a massive trash incinerator near the school that could have emitted significant chemicals into the already heavily polluted neighborhood (Nonko, 2018). Also in Maryland, the community school initiative in Prince George’s County offers classroom educators stipends to serve as “Community School Laisons” alongside community school coordinators so that they can learn the strategy of community schooling ([Prince George’s County Public Schools, Prince George’s County Educators’ Association, & Prince George’s Community Schools Network, 2022](#)).

Many other recent examples abound of community schools centering classroom instruction. New Mexico’s 2019 Community Schools Act references “community-based curriculum in which the content of instruction is centered on local knowledge, service learning and problem-solving around community issues” ([New Mexico Legislature, 2019](#)). In Southern New Mexico, Las Cruces Public Schools community school initiative partnered with

Cruces Creatives and Community Share to more deeply engage community partners and community-centered learning projects into the academic curriculum ([HAZLO Foundation, 2019](#); [DeSimio, 2022](#)). In the Community Schools Forward Framework, one of the six key practices for transformational community schools is “rigorous community-connected curriculum” ([Learning Policy Institute, n.d.](#)).

The recent burst of innovation around community school teaching and learning harkens back to the “community curriculum” wave of the community schools movement identified by John Rogers. In the midst of the recent re-awakening around community school teaching and learning, it makes sense to examine what has been said regarding the instructional framework for community schools.

Method

To help contribute to a more cohesive and comprehensive understanding of such a framework, we conducted a systematic analysis of over four hundred articles related to teaching and learning in community schools, including a deep reading and synthesis of *over forty* practitioner and scholarly focused publications. Our findings offer a framework for thinking about teaching and learning in the community school context that we hope will be useful for community school practitioners and scholars interested in the instructional aspect of community schools in the modern era. For more information about the literature review protocol and data analysis, please see [this addendum](#).

Findings

From the set of articles analyzed, we developed five general elements of community school teaching and learning that seek to capture the essential aspects

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discussed in the literature. The table below outlines the codes that we converted into those elements.

Table 1: Themes from the literature on community schools and teaching and learning

1. Deep and interdisciplinary
2. Whole child, healing-aligned, and relationship-centered
3. Student-driven and democratic
4. Culturally and linguistically sustaining
5. Community-based Learning

These elements seek to capture different perspectives on what constitutes teaching and learning in community schools, but they are not mutually exclusive. There is significant overlap and synergy between each element. For example, instruction can be, and often is, both deep and interdisciplinary as well as community-based and culturally sustaining. It was a notable finding that the notion of teaching and learning was aligned, consistent, and coherent across the vast majority of the articles. The sections below briefly describe in more detail each of the elements of community school instruction.

Defining teaching and learning in a community school

Community schools largely focus on attending to the conditions for learning to make room for teachers to focus on teaching and learning. So, it was not surprising to see many articles in our review not specifically defining teaching and learning in community schools. Some articles merely suggest that community school instruction is “[j]ust like traditional schools,” in that “an effective community school demonstrates a challenging

instructional program with qualified teachers and high standards” (Durham & Connolly, 2016, p.1). A typical example of this is the 2017 Coalition for Community Schools Community School Standards, which state that community schools have “A core instructional program with high standards and high expectations for students, qualified teachers, and challenging curriculum provides for academic excellence” (Coalition for Community Schools, 2017). This document was focused addressing in an overarching way the entire strategy inside and out and was not intended to go deeper into instructional practices but set the stage for further work in defining “high standards” and “challenging curriculum” which would come later.

Several articles focus on how community schools remove barriers to learning to “let teachers teach.” These articles speak about how community schools address barriers to learning, such as challenges with health, housing, and food security. One article cites a teacher explaining that community schools have “reduced the number of ‘hats that a teacher needs to wear.’ Having these additional supports available provides teachers with a way to focus on their teaching and to have other staff or partners at the school site handle problems that would otherwise fall on them.” (Fehrer & Leos-Urbel, 2015, p.12). Articles that touched on this theme underscore the importance of classroom instruction in community schools, but they do not suggest a unique community school style or framework for instruction.

Although several articles speak about teaching and learning in such broad strokes, most articles included in this literature review did indeed outline clear elements of teaching and learning that are specific to the community school strategy. These articles propose that teaching and learning in a community school is and should be different compared to a non-community school. For example,

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the articles conceptualize instruction as responsive to the whole child and to students' cultural and neighborhood contexts, rather than just focusing on the narrow academic goal of improving test scores. Additionally, teaching needs to be inquiry-driven, often with an eye toward embedding place-based projects in the curriculum of community schools. Learning is described as active and happening inside and outside classrooms.

The following sections describe each of the five elements of teaching and learning in community schools described by the article set.

Deep and Interdisciplinary

Deeper learning “develops students’ abilities to think critically and solve complex problems, communicate effectively, work collaboratively, and learn independently ([LPI, 2018](#)).” Deeper learning engages with the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy – moving beyond basic factual recall of information towards more evaluative and creative engagement with material and real-world application of knowledge. Deeper learning theorist Jal Mehta explains that “Deeper Learning is the understanding of not just the surface features of a subject or discipline, but the underlying structures or ideas.” (Mehta & Fine, 2020, p. 8).

The seminal article from the literature on community schools and deeper learning is Daniel, Quartz, and Oakes (2019) *Teaching in Community Schools: Creating Conditions for Deeper Learning*. The authors argue that the community school pillars “create a structure in community schools that enables the principles of deeper learning to flourish and that supports community cohesion and sustainability.” This article clearly makes the point that the unique approach to deeper learning in community schools distinguishes community school pedagogy from traditional schools. The article states

“[t]hese views of deeper learning represent a dramatic departure from the views of learning that underlie traditional classroom instruction—views of learning as acquiring, retaining, and recalling new information—and they certainly contrast with behavioral perspectives of learning as conditioning” (Daniel, Quartz, and Oakes, 2019, p.457).

Interdisciplinary learning goes hand and hand with deeper learning, in that often more complex learning objectives call for a multi-disciplinary approach to evaluating and solving real-world challenges. Quartz, Daniel, & Maier (2020) provides examples of three community schools that leverage interdisciplinary approaches. Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School in New York prioritizes “interdisciplinary lessons planned by teams of teachers,” and the school participates in the New York Performance Standards Consortium so that assessment often takes the form of performance or portfolio assessment as opposed to traditional “bubble tests.” This shift in student assessment reinforces deeper learning as well as interdisciplinary instruction. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School in San Francisco is another highlighted example that privileges “meaningful educational experiences” that are interdisciplinary (Quartz, Daniel, & Maier, 2020, para. 13). In one project on immigration at MLK, students use various disciplinary approaches to explore, apply and process content. Their self-selected projects range from qualitative interviews of local residents with insights on immigration policy to creating videos and art projects with the support of MLK’s integrated arts teacher. The last school that was discussed was UCLA Community School, which is in the process of creating a Multilingual Interdisciplinary Social Action (MISA) project – a strong example of interdisciplinary curriculum (Cerdeira, in press).

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Whole child, healing-aligned, and relationship-centered

The next core element of community school teaching and learning relates to classroom practices that cultivate relationships, holistic wellbeing, and a sense of shared belonging, often thought of as “whole child education.” This approach minimizes punitive and exclusionary styles of classroom management so that students feel safe and supported. The articles claim that community schools “[c]reate learning spaces that respond to the needs of the whole child, the whole school and community.” (Saunders et al., 2021, p. 6). The literature stresses the alignment of community schooling with the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD), offering that “A community schools approach is grounded by the science of learning and development and recognizes that young people (and adults) learn best when they feel known, understood, supported, and engaged” (Knudson & Kimner, 2022, p.4).

Articles also offer several examples of whole-child education in action. Saunders et al. (2021) conducted a case study of Social Justice Humanitas Academy in Los Angeles and found that, “teachers use a variety of tools to better understand students’ preferences, needs, and competencies so they can provide more personalized supports,” and that they “tailor students’ and adults’ expressions of care and appreciation to what makes each individual feel valued.” Teachers also explicitly integrate social and emotional learning across their curriculum, such as starting class with check-ins before diving into the academic objectives of the day.

Such concepts were echoed by Sanders and Galindo (2022), which examined another full-service community school on the East Coast. One educator in that case study explained that “the way you manage a classroom always has to be rooted in

understanding the whole child, not just regimented.... It's all about the relationships, and how you leverage those real relationships to ensure that kids are learning” (Sanders and Galindo 2022, p. 15).

Student Centered and Democratic

The third element of community school teaching and learning speaks to the democratic nature of how curricular decisions are made. In community schools, learning is structured around student interests. Melaville, Berg, & Blank (2006) state that in community schools, “Learning tasks are active and allow students to take an active role in decision making” (Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006). Instead of learning being top-down and scripted by external sources, knowledge is actively co-constructed by students, and students feel like they have a say in the content and process of their learning. Sabia (2012) states that “[C]lassroom practices may include student–teacher collaboration on the organization of physical space and time, on the selection and/or development of common and individual projects that might be pursued within the context of the curriculum, and on how lessons or whole subjects might be taught, and students may be involved in actual teaching” (p. 382).

Sabia goes on to explain that such a student-centered approach is aligned with the broader interest in facilitating democratic education. Democracy is “less a subject to be taught than a way of life to be cultivated” (Sabia, 2012, p. 385). It is in this spirit that community schools foster a more democratic society through the engagement in practices within the classroom that develop “democratic skills” and “democratic virtues and commitments.” In community schools, the classroom becomes a laboratory of democracy in which students are treated as active citizens with rights, roles and responsibilities. Sabia also suggests

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that democratic community schools foster a critical lens by which students learn to interrogate the sources of knowledge, especially on contentious social issues, and to be attuned to injustice and oppression.

Culturally-Relevant/Culturally-Sustaining

The fourth element of community school instruction relates to how teaching and learning honors cultural pluralism in the classroom through culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies. Kane et al. (2021) describe this framework and how it builds on the cultural assets that students bring to the classroom: “As a subset of asset pedagogies, culturally sustaining pedagogy employs a cultural pluralist approach to honoring these assets, ‘sustaining them in both the traditional and evolving ways they are lived and used’” (Paris, 2012, as cited in Kane et al., 2021, p. 515). Community school instruction diverges from the tradition of teaching and learning rooted in cultural assimilation, whereby students are expected to sacrifice diverse cultural assets in order to adopt dominant cultural traits. Schooling in the 19th and 20th centuries was oriented towards the assimilationist model of schooling. Perhaps the most overt example of this was native boarding schools, which were explicitly designed to replace indigenous culture with dominant Eurocentric culture. The assimilationist trend punished students for speaking languages other than English and aimed to elevate American identity, defined as English-speaking, Protestant, and Anglo-Saxon. De Royston and Madkins (2019) explain, “The FSCS model marks a shift in assumptions about schooling, teaching, and learning, from a model where schools implicitly or explicitly aim to assimilate children into existing systems” towards a system that is “culturally relevant, flexible, and responsive” (p. 4, 11).

A significant article on this topic is Daniel et. al’s 2020, “A Step Closer to Racial Equity: Towards a Culturally Sustaining Model for Community Schools” in which the authors “incorporate into the conversation of community schools the impulse that advanced out of the various racial equity cosmologies made whole through people fighting against top-down, Eurocentric, culturally destructive manifestations of schooling” (p. 4). The authors propose four principles of culturally sustaining community schools: Radical imagination, community organizing, self-determination and self-valuation, and healing practices. This approach “positions cultural and linguistic diversity as strengths that are rooted in the lives of students and their communities and honored as assets in the classroom” (p. 9). The article provided a case study of a community school in the South Bronx, New York City, which “partnered with local leaders to bring community cultural wealth into the school” and where “teachers drew from community knowledge in their teaching practices” (p. 18, 24).

Community-Based Learning

The last element of community school teaching and learning was *the most cited in the literature and is perhaps the archetypal element of community school teaching and learning – the concept of community-based learning (CBL)*. Through CBL, “Community schools use the community as a resource to engage students in learning and service and help them become problem solvers and asset builders in their communities...The community-as-text approach uses the history, culture, challenges, and circumstances of the community as the content for learning, rather than just the information provided in textbooks” (Blank et al., 2003, p.108-109). This idea stems from Dewey, according to Jacobson 2016: “Dewey understood that the community in which one lived functioned as a ‘living classroom’ in that the person learns from

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daily activities as a part of their community environment" (Jacobson, 2016, p.2).

Melaville et al. (2006) published a guide to community-based learning. They argue that “Drawing on the assets of a community—its history, culture, resources, and challenges—can help schools build citizens while infusing academic course work with meaning and relevance” (Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006). The guide highlights six models of community-based learning: academically based community service, civic education, environment-based education, place-based learning, service learning, and work-based learning.

Tieu et al. (2022) describe community-based learning in science classrooms. Community-based science “links science concepts to students’ direct lived experiences in their neighborhood to address educational equity and justice” (Tieu et al., 2022, para. 1). This article highlights examples of how science educators utilized local community issues that students cared about, like the lack of parks and green space in their neighborhood, as windows into scientific content like climate change and the carbon cycle. Educators helped students understand the importance of parks in combating rising heat levels associated with climate change, and the class collectively explored the chemical properties of carbon and how parks can function as carbon sinks to reduce CO₂ and slow global warming. The California State Transformational Assistance Center developed a community-based learning guide and planning tool. The tool suggests that community-based learning “draw[s] from the cultural wealth, funds of knowledge, and indigenous ways of knowing of students, families, and educators to cultivate responsive classrooms that foster a deep sense of belonging” (State Transformational Assistance Center, n.d.-b). The

tool outlines several domains of community-based learning, listed below in Table 2.

Table 2: Components of Community-Based Learning

Place-Based	Relationship-Centered	Addressing Community Needs and Assets
Community Connected	Community Knowledge and Assets	Reinforce Values of Equity and Justice
Individual Student and Collective Community Agency	Civic Engagement and Civic Mindedness	Meaningful and Agentive Assessments

Conclusion

Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, we have proposed five elements to community school teaching and learning, which we hope can be a guide for community schools that are hoping to shift their instruction to align with the community school strategy. We recognize that the wholesale adoption of these five elements is not an easy shift for many schools and districts, and the transition might take time. On the other hand, many schools and districts have already embraced instructional reforms around these elements. With so many students feeling disengaged in learning, there is no better time to reimagine pedagogy. Employing these five elements in the community school classroom can make learning relevant to boost achievement and develop a sense of agency so students become problem-solvers and active participants in

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democracy. For school districts and individual community schools that are interested in getting started with community-based learning, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Map existing instructional initiatives:** Many of the elements of community school teaching and learning are already promoted through mainstream instructional learning networks and initiatives. The move to make instruction culturally responsive and sustaining is far from new, for example, and likely there are resources related to whole-child education and student-centered learning that also already exist in a school or district. It is important to identify, build on, and integrate existing instructional reform strategies that are related to the community school classroom elements discussed above.
- **Consider piloting innovative strategies in small groups:** Identify educators who are “early adopters” of the instructional frameworks described above, and bring them together to network, share and learn from other interested educators. Collect samples of community-based lesson plans and instructional resources from these educators. California and Maryland have both developed educator fellowships where classroom teachers from across the state gather to learn about community schools teaching and learning. Start small and then scale!
- **Ensure adequate staffing:** We encourage community school systems to adequately staff and resource the instructional elements of the community school strategy. For example, a district can use teacher coach positions to help develop model lesson

plans. In San Diego, Los Angeles, and Anaheim, classroom educators are selected as community school teacher leads or site-coaches. These educators are provided full or partial release time from teaching, or receive a stipend to work extra hours, in order to coach other school staff on expanded and enriched classroom instruction, community-based learning, and collaborative leadership.

The importance of the five elements of community schools pedagogy speak to how schools can engage young people in an uncertain world. And as our society and our education system grapple with the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI), as well as a host of other variables, it is the core elements of teaching discussed here that cannot be automated. Learning that is student-centered, deep and interdisciplinary, rooted in local issues, grounded in the whole child, and reflective of cultural difference, represents an unabashedly human-centered core of the process of schooling. Community schools that embody these classroom elements are a beacon of light in a nebulous future.

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