

Leonard Covello: A Study of Progressive Leadership and Community Empowerment

lorenzo krakowsky

Introduction

patrick shannon

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
patrick shannon	
Leonard Covello: A Study of Progressive Leadership and Community Empowerment	7
lorenzo krakowsky	
An Immigrant Life: Covello’s Journey	9
Covello’s Philosophy: A Powerful and Compassionate Progressivism	16
An Integrated Curriculum: The Primacy of Culture and Social Issues	20
Covello in the Community: The Dean of East Harlem	23
Connecting Community and Culture: Covello as Ethnographer	28
Benjamin Franklin High School: A New Paradigm	29
Why Covello Matters Today	38
REFERENCES	40
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES	42

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INTRODUCTION

patrick shannon

The true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems.

John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*

Lorenzo Krakowsky's loving history of Leonard Covello's progressive work at and around Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem begins with the current rhetoric and practices of public schooling in America. During the last 30 years, businessmen, federal officials, and media pundits have framed public schooling in terms of human and physical capital and dealt with schools accordingly. Schools are expected to develop the skills and knowledge of the children they teach so that their students become facile life-long learners who are ready and able to retool independently to succeed within a constantly and rapidly changing global economy. To accomplish this, schools become markets in two ways: as places where entrepreneurs compete to meet the needs of their clients (businesses, taxpayers, students, and parents); and as places where businesses hawk goods and services that are designed to ameliorate continually low academic productivity. This approach to schooling has been reiterated through federal educational policies—*A Nation at Risk*, *Educate America*, and *No Child Left Behind*—that offered additional funding for those schools willing to comply with their regulations. Claiming pragmatic and progressive roots, the Obama administration's *Race to the Top* competition pits states against one another in order to determine the best models for accomplishing the goals of business through schooling. This might be the unkindest cut of all.

By looking back to Covello's work, Krakowsky locates the problems of our present situation in schools' retreat from a core progressive goal—the development of social capital within students and community members. By neglecting social capital—our capacity to establish and nurture networks of associations, practices, and relationships that bind us together as communities—we struggle to meet basic human needs despite the fact that we live in an economically rich environment. When funds of social capital are drained, we

understand ourselves as individuals responsible only for our personal well being, and perhaps that of our families as well. For short-term personal gain and comfort, we bundle bad debts to sell to others; strive to “Save Money, Live Better”; incarcerate one in every hundred citizens; tie health insurance to employment without ensuring job security; wage wars for oil so that we can build houses away from work, food, and social events...the list of these negative consequences is endless. Although all of these problems can be traced to the unregulated pursuit of profit, none can be addressed through the framing of schooling in terms of human and physical capital development. On the contrary, such schooling exacerbates these problems in old and new ways, leading us away from what Dewey (1902) understood to be democracy: “a mode of associated living” (p. 83).

Covello saw, and Krakowsky sees, a different role for public schools—one that centers on the development of social capital. Their political vision resonates with the historical agency of other progressive educators. Dewey (1897) took a stance against what he saw as “the evils of the present industrial and political situation” (p.72)—poverty, unemployment, isolation, ignorance, racism, and nationalization—which militated against the development of democratic sympathy and cooperation between individuals and within communities. Accompanying his critique was a constructive plan to test a proposed method to develop social capital among students by reordering the priorities of schooling. The three R’s would become work in language, literature, and numbers that took students into their communities so that they could identify and address social problems. At the same time, members of the community would be invited into schools so that they could demonstrate how they formed networks to adapt habits of mind and action to rapidly changing social circumstances. In Dewey’s mind, and in the actions of many progressives who followed, opening school doors to let the students out and the citizens in made schools the center of the community (Field & Nearing, 1916; Nearing, 1915).

As Krakowsky eloquently describes, Covello did not experience such schooling as a student, but he did participate in the community networks (settlement houses, ethnic clubs, and the YMCA) that were established to help recent immigrants navigate the new demands of urban industrial environments just after the turn of the 19th century. His teaching overlapped both with the height of the schools-as-the-social-center movement, which articulated the entry of community members into schools (Ward, 1913), and with the

celebration of action-oriented pedagogy, which sent students into communities (Dewey & Dewey, 1915). Covello's remarkable personal agency within East Harlem and among the many ethnic groups who inhabited that community during his 50-year career was directly connected to those vibrant social forces, which were present in rural, small town, and urban communities. While his leadership was certainly unique, his ideas and actions were evidence of the collective power of social capital, which was duplicated—to varying degrees—across the United States. Krakowsky demonstrates that Covello dedicated his life to developing social capital among the young men in his school in order to improve community life and democracy. These are noble, progressive goals.

History is about the present. The social forces behind Covello's work make Krakowsky's essay a timely call for leadership to bring about a return to progressive agendas, such as Dewey's, for public schooling. As they did in Covello's day, groups working to form and use social networks could help educators to question the framework of the production of human and physical capital that currently drives schooling in America. Rather than racing to the top for capital's sake, these groups might seek to strengthen their local communities and to connect their work to similar projects around the country and the globe. Educators who hear Krakowsky's call might seek to couple their work in schools with the work of these community groups, providing access to social capital in order to further democratic projects. What could be accomplished if progressive teachers connected their schools with local affiliates of organizations such as ACORN,¹ CODEPINK,² and NNIRR³ in order to work toward such goals as: advocating for the rights of low- and middle-income families; moving away from a permanent war economy; and securing civil rights for immigrants and refugees? Community gardening, involvement in the local food movement, and even social-center activities (such as reclaiming abandoned buildings as public spaces) show promise as modes of associated living that could unite schools and communities. Through collective works in which the well-being of people and communities is paramount, progressive leadership that unites schools and

¹ ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, is a collection of advocacy organizations for low- and moderate-income families.

² CODEPINK is a peace and social justice movement organization.

³ NNIRR, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, works "to promote a just immigration and refugee policy in the United States." Source: NNIRR Web site, www.nnirr.org

communities around the development of social capital and democracy can make history by addressing the problems that currently confront us.

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LEONARD COVELLO: A STUDY OF PROGRESSIVE LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

lorenzo krakowsky

I first heard about Leonard Covello from Frank Pignatelli, my advisor at Bank Street. Frank encouraged me to find out more about this exceptional leader, who was the founding principal of Benjamin Franklin High School (BFHS) in East Harlem in the 1930s. Covello's story intrigued me for a number of reasons, both personal and professional. Like Covello, I am an immigrant, as are my parents. I was born in Mexico, and they started life in Europe. I came to the United States with them when I was four years old, speaking French and Spanish. I have always lived with the tension of being an outsider in a new situation, moving first to San Francisco as a young boy, and then to New York City when I was fifteen. The process of acquiring a new language and culture is familiar to me, and I have reflected throughout my life on the construct and parameters of culture.

I also identify with Covello's oppositional reaction to his own schooling. I attended a traditional French school in San Francisco for nine years. The school's philosophy was predicated on the importance of both unquestionable authority and competition. My own teaching and orientation toward a humanistic, collaborative, and progressive pedagogy can be seen as a reaction to my experiences at school.

Covello's career appeals to me on a professional level because of his focus on intercultural education, public service, and partnership. He had an inimitable ability to stand shoulder to shoulder with his students without in any way compromising his status as their school leader. His work presents a unique marriage of humanistic and charismatic leadership with extraordinary organizational and community-building skills. He has long been underappreciated, despite his monumental contributions to the East Harlem community and his role as one of the most effective progressive leaders of his time. This essay is an attempt to bring his work to the attention of a wider audience of educators with the hope that they will appreciate its relevance in the schools of the early 21st century.

In 1932 educational theorist and activist George Counts published his seminal book, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* Counts's critique of the progressive education movement was largely a response to what he saw as a purely child-centered approach to education—advocated chiefly by John Dewey and other early progressives—which had been, in his estimation, appropriated by the upper classes to serve their own interests. Counts (1932) argued that upper-middle-class liberals had essentially hijacked progressive education and that the movement needed to “emancipate itself from the influence of this class, face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relationship with the community, [and] develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare...” (p. 7).

Two years later, in September 1934, BFHS opened its doors to over 1800 boys. Covello, BFHS's founder and principal from 1934 until 1956, was an Italian immigrant educated in New York City's public schools and a lifelong resident of East Harlem. His career endures as one of the best and purest examples of Counts's vision of a socially powerful and transformational progressivism. But Covello's legacy was much more than this. He became a school leader who played multiple roles—social historian, political activist, cultural ethnographer, even local newspaper publisher—in his quest to serve all members of his community.

Cordasco (1975a) characterizes Covello as a protean figure who not only studied the Italian American experience, but also played a key role in shaping it. In fact, Covello is an original figure in urban history who personified a deeply compassionate, unapologetic, and muscular brand of progressivism. His work, while not widely publicized, had an ongoing and profound influence on the educational and cultural landscape throughout the 20th century. It is especially relevant today.

The major objective of this study is to examine Covello's work within the twin frameworks of educational leadership and progressivism. I begin by providing a biographical sketch of Covello and then explore his professional and personal philosophy and the way that these played out in his roles as educational and community leader, sociopolitical activist, and community ethnographer. I then examine BFHS as a new paradigm for educational institutions, with an emphasis on its pioneering work in developing student leaders, engaging in community activism, and promoting intercultural education. Finally, I look at the larger implications of Covello's work in an era of increased emphasis on

testing and standardization. I hope that this study contributes to a reinvigorated conversation about progressive education and its potential to improve our communities as well as our schools.

An Immigrant Life: Covello's Journey

Leonard Covello was born in Avigliano, in Southern Italy, in 1887. His father immigrated to New York City soon after and was joined by Leonard, his mother, and his brother in 1896. They settled in East Harlem, which Meyer (2010) calls “a community of original settlement, whose housing was constructed specifically for immigrants.” He further characterizes turn-of-the-century East Harlem as a highly homogeneous neighborhood with poor housing conditions, tremendous overcrowding, and a low level of literacy.

In his autobiography, Covello (1958) discusses in detail the daily conditions in the tenements, the streets, and the schools of East Harlem. He attended the “Soup School” on 116th Street and 2nd Avenue, which he describes as follows:

Silence! Silence! Silence! This was the characteristic feature of our existence at the Soup School. You never made an unnecessary noise or said an unnecessary word. Outside in the hall we lined up by size, girls in one line and boys in another, without uttering a sound. Eyes front and at attention. Lord help you if you broke the rule of silence. (Perrone, 1998, p.88)

He also writes that his original name, Leonardo Coviello, was changed to Leonard Covello by one of his teachers at the Soup School.

These were important experiences for Covello as he learned to adapt to a new country and a new culture. One could argue that his later emphasis on student voice and the preservation of Italian culture and heritage represented an oppositional response to his own experiences growing up. Covello (1958) talks about the almost exclusive use of memorization and drill as the ways to teach and learn in the various public schools he attended. Again, the fact that at BFHS he emphasized discussion, interdisciplinary work, and critical questioning can be seen as a reaction against the way he was educated. He describes how “[t]he constant drilling and the pressure of memorizing, the homework, and detention raised havoc with many students” (Perrone, 1998, p. 95).

Even more important than his school experiences was his association with Anna Ruddy, a missionary from Canada who founded the Home Garden, later renamed Haarlem House. Ruddy's influence was profound; Covello adapted her vision of social service and the social gospel to serve the community of East Harlem (Meyer, 2010). Covello's life and work can thus be framed in part by the settlement house movement that shaped many progressive thinkers and educators in the early 20th century. Covello (1958) describes the role of the Home Garden in his life as a boy in East Harlem:

Away from the Home Garden we fought the Second Avenue gang with rocks and tin cans and used garbage can covers for shields. We scavenged the dumps and the river front for anything we could sell to make a penny... But at the same time we spent Sunday afternoons and several nights a week at the Home Garden with Miss Ruddy, where we formed another club called the Boys' Club. We read books, put on plays, sang songs. There was nothing strange about this duality, although it may seem so to people who have never been poor or lived in crowded, big-city slums... (Perrone, 1998, p. 92)

Covello thus lived the experience that his students would live a generation later. He carried with him the tensions inherent in growing up an immigrant in a poor urban area. Another conflict was more centrally related to culture. Later in his narrative, Covello (1958) describes how, as a boy, he was embarrassed by his parents and wanted to keep them away from his school at all costs (Perrone, 1998, p. 97). However, after attending Morris High School and then going on to Columbia University, Covello's understanding and appreciation of his own culture evolved:

The reaction was setting in. What at one time we were ashamed of, must now be brought into the open. How else could we make peace with our souls? Had it been in my power, I am sure I would have returned the "i" which Mrs. Cutter of the Soup School had dropped from Coviello. (Perrone, 1998, p. 107)

In summing up the formative years of Covello's life, Peebles (1968) writes:

His life as a young immigrant boy in one of New York's publicized deprived areas, gave him a basis throughout his life for understanding the problems facing people living under similar conditions. An early concern for the needs of people in these circumstances was growing during these years which has maintained itself throughout his life. Such institutions as the Home Garden, schools, the Y.M.C.A. and their relationship to the family and the community all awakened in him an awareness of what needed to be done and what could be done in meeting the realities of life, and more specifically, the situations confronting minority groups. (pp.102-103)

Covello used this life experience as a basis for his work not only as an educator and school leader, but also as a community activist and an ethnographer.

At DeWitt Clinton High School (Clinton), where he taught from 1911 to 1917 and again from 1920 to 1934, Covello developed the philosophy and leadership skills that he would later employ at BFHS with such success. As Meyer (1989) puts it, "Covello began to implement strategies for improving Italo-American high school students' achievement by alleviating, if not eliminating, the conflict between the ethos of American educational institutions and the adapted Southern Italian mores" (pp. 10-11). Meyer argues that this initially took three forms: promoting the study of Italian; organizing *Circoli Italiani* (Italian student clubs); and founding the *Casa del Popolo*, a settlement house in East Harlem.

At Clinton, Covello began teaching Italian and then founded an Italian Department in the early 1920s. Registration in the department grew from 62 students in 1921 to 475 in 1924. Clinton had the largest number of students studying Italian in the city's high schools and indeed in the entire country (Peebles, 1968, p.144). Peebles argues that the success of the department was due largely to Covello's commitment to teaching Italian and the appreciation of Italian culture to a group composed primarily of Italian American students. Covello wrote an Italian language textbook specifically designed for high school students and began to integrate the teaching of Italian with the students' personal cultural experiences. As Peebles explains:

Students in the Italian Department were urged to give of themselves in their homes, their communities, and their schools. Questionnaires were used to elicit information regarding conditions that prevailed in the Italian home and community. Home visiting by the Italian staff often was arranged to acquaint the Italian family with the school program and to aid the adjustment problem that frequently led to misunderstandings between the students and their parents. (p.146)

Through this growing understanding of what an academic department could achieve vis-à-vis an immigrant community, and the idea that schools should concern themselves with the life conditions of their students through research, action, and personal involvement, Covello set the stage for the work he would later do at BFHS on a much larger scale.

While still at Clinton, Covello began to initiate and become involved in a variety of interrelated activities and groups—both in school and in the larger community—that promoted Italian culture, the improvement of intercultural relations, and developing leadership in his students. One such group, as mentioned earlier, was *Il Circolo Italiano*, a language and service club which Covello founded in 1914 with the student leadership of Benjamin Segreto. According to Meyer (2010) *Il Circolo Italiano*'s stress on teaching Italian and promoting an understanding of Italian culture had two major goals: overcoming Southern Italian immigrant parents' misgivings about prolonging the education of their children, and providing the community with strong leadership. *Il Circolo Italiano* served as a means to develop student leaders through its emphasis on social service. Students were involved in many aspects of settlement house work, such as teaching English to immigrants and working with younger children in various programs. As a result, "The boys who served as leaders of this club during the twenties were dynamic and talented, most becoming successful professional individuals in teaching, government, medicine, and law" (Peebles, 1968, p.135).

Peebles (1968) goes on to describe a number of other activities and organizations that engaged Covello in the 1920s and early 1930s, including the Italian Teachers Association, the Order of the Sons of Italy, and the Italian Educational League (pp.153-166). In 1922 Covello was invited to teach at New

York University, where he initiated an Italian class and began to pursue his own doctorate. Covello (1958) writes:

The idea grew in my mind of doing a comprehensive study on the social background of the Southern Italian. In order to cope with problems dealing with the education of the immigrant and his American child, it was first necessary to have all of the information I could accumulate. (Perrone, 1998, p. 119)

In 1927 Covello began a collaborative project with the Boys' Club of New York which led to a community study of East Harlem. This work was critically important to Covello's development as a researcher and socio-community ethnographer who understood the connections between community, culture, and education.

In the early 1920s Covello was also directing a settlement house in East Harlem called the Casa del Popolo. Meyer (2010) describes the Casa del Popolo as a place that provided both English and Italian language instruction, thereby supporting both cultures. (Vito Marcantonio, a student—and later, friend and ally—of Covello's, who went on to serve as East Harlem's congressman for many years, taught La Casa's citizenship classes.) In his work at Casa del Popolo, Covello served the needs of his community in numerous interrelated ways. He taught and counseled students and worked with their families. At the same time, he was overseeing a number of social action programs that served these groups, researching their lives and needs in detail, and creating opportunities for grassroots community leadership.

In addition, in 1932 Covello organized the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau. Cordasco (1975b) examines this endeavor at length. He writes that it was “[h]oused in two small rooms at the Casa Italiana, [and] its financial support derived from the Federal Writer's Project which had been set up by the United States Government as part of the Works Project Administration...” (p. 2). It is important to note the WPA's relationship to the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau, since the WPA would later support other aspects of Covello's work as well. According to Cordasco, the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau had three major purposes: to be a fact-finding organization; to centralize efforts that would support the social and cultural advancement of Italian

Americans; and to organize and implement a program that would promote educational and social activities (p. 3).

Here we can again see both Covello's focus on an integrative approach and his developing vision of how schools and related organizations would serve the Italian American community. In a bulletin he wrote in 1933 concerning the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau, Covello observed: "The need for unification and coordination of all kinds of educational work in Italian-American communities is therefore a pressing matter. The policy of drifting and of short-sighted opportunism has been all too dominant in shaping the direction of Italian-American community life" (Cordasco, 1975b, p. 3).

Covello's work at BFHS can be seen as both the culmination and the scaling up of his 20 years of work at Clinton. While I examine BFHS in more detail later, two salient aspects of its creation and goals deserve mention here. The first concerns the goals as a reflection of Covello's commitment to the ideal of the school as a force for community action. True to this progressive spirit, writes Peebles (1968):

Leonard Covello believed that the school should be a vigorous social agent serving to unite the community and school in a combined effort to confront the many problems that existed in East Harlem. Schools traditionally had not been oriented in this fashion, and in New York City they had not concerned themselves with community problems. (pp. 197-198)

The second key aspect of BFHS's goals was that the school strove to be (and indeed became) a community center serving its people in multiple ways. The school building was accordingly used on a continual basis for much more than traditional academic classes involving students and teachers. Covello (1958) describes part of the speech he gave in April 1942 at the dedication of the new BFHS building on 116th Street and Pleasant Avenue:

In speaking about the program of the school, I added, 'Fulfilling the ideal of Community Service to which it has been dedicated, the Benjamin Franklin High School will now operate on a round-the-clock program of use by all community organizations. Believing that a school building should be available to all members of the

community all of the time...our building is to be open every hour of every day of the year. (Perrone, 1998, pp.136-137)

The construction of BFHS is also worth examining, as it illustrates Covello's close ties to such influential political figures as Vito Marcantonio and Fiorello LaGuardia, New York City's famous mayor. According to Meyer (1989), "The project that brought them closest was the effort to obtain a permanent home for Benjamin Franklin High School, East Harlem's first and only high school. Covello and Marcantonio pressured LaGuardia to provide the funds for the construction of a new edifice" (p.13). Featherstone (2005) analyzes Covello's role as a master community organizer and writes:

One of his crowning achievements as an organizer was the successful campaign to pressure Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia to build a new school building. This was a product not only of rallying the school and its neighborhoods, but of Covello's long engagement with New York City politics at the electoral level—one of his favorite students and protégés was Vito Marcantonio, the immensely popular radical Congressman. (p.16)

Like much of Covello's work, this accomplishment was both organic, growing naturally from his long relationship with Marcantonio, and consciously organized, a result of careful planning and effort.

Covello's lifelong friendship and collaboration with Marcantonio is instructive as well. Like Covello, Marcantonio grew up in East Harlem. As mentioned earlier, he was Covello's student at Clinton, participating in Il Circolo Italiano and El Casa del Popolo. He went on to be one of LaGuardia's most important aides and an exceptionally effective community organizer in his own right. In his analysis of Covello's life and work, Perrone (1998) describes a young Marcantonio, as a student representative of Il Circolo Italiano, giving a fiery speech at a presentation ceremony featuring LaGuardia, then president of the city's Board of Aldermen. The subject of the speech was society's treatment of the elderly. As Covello (1958) described the event:

The applause which followed as Marc backed away from the lectern convinced me more than ever that adolescents are far more

capable of serious thought and understanding than they are given credit for being...LaGuardia shook Marc's hand, slapped him on the shoulder in a congratulatory gesture. Then, in his own inimitable way, he thrust out his chin and picked up the thread of Marc's speech and used it as a basis for his own talk. (Perrone, 1998, p. 58)

Perrone goes on to note the importance—exemplified by Marcantonio's participation in the presentation ceremony—of giving students real responsibility and asking them to consider important social problems.

In discussing the relationship between Covello and Marcantonio, Meyer (1989) also notes that:

Neither Covello or Marcantonio ever wanted to leave the community. From the early thirties they lived in adjacent brownstones on East 116th Street ... Their commitment embraced all the community's residents. They never flinched from insisting that Blacks and Puerto Ricans be given equal access by right to the same schools and public housing. (p. 13)

Both of these points are key: first, both Covello and Marcantonio represented what Peebles (1968) calls indigenous leadership in their community and stayed there throughout their lives; and second, not just their fellow Italian Americans, but also people of all backgrounds, were included in their vision of community and social justice.

After his retirement from BFHS, Covello continued his work as an educational and community leader, with a particular focus on Puerto Ricans and other immigrant groups. He was an educational consultant to the Migration Division of the Department of Labor of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and a leading figure in the East Harlem Day Care Center for adults. Covello moved back to Italy in 1972, where he served as a consultant to the Danilo Dolci Center for Study and Action in Sicily. He died in 1982.

Covello's Philosophy: A Powerful and Compassionate Progressivism

An examination of Covello's core values must begin with his conception of, and commitment to, love and relationships. As Perrone (1998) writes:

Knowing the myriad ways that Covello stayed in touch with his students over the years, the fact that he was involved in their lives, often visited them in hospitals, even prisons, people occasionally asked him: Don't you "get ... tired of the boys?" Covello noted in response: "I ask them if they get tired of the people they love." (p. 24)

Perrone goes on to discuss the importance of love in schools, noting that "It is love that keeps teachers fully engaged in their work" (p. 24). Covello clearly understood this, and felt it strongly. His commitment to the students in his care—and to both their present and future welfare—cannot be overstated. Perrone concludes his study with these words of Covello's: "I believe and will always believe in the potential of every boy to lead a good and useful life—if we as adults will only care enough, take the time and trouble and the expense to develop this potential" (p. 144).

Covello's philosophy was also centered around a deep and nuanced understanding of the role that family played in the life of his students. "The real educational problem among the Italians and Jews of yesterday and the Puerto Ricans of today," Covello (1958) writes, "lies in the emotional conflicts that are particularly tormenting to the boy whose parents are deeply oriented by centuries of foreign tradition and custom" (Perrone, 1998, p. 127). Here, Covello not only displays his enduring compassion for the problems of his students, but also articulates one of the key tensions for first and second generation immigrants as they attempt to integrate themselves into the American educational system.

Orsi (2002) discusses Covello's conception of the *domus*—the Italian American home and family—as the overarching source of morality and identity in that community. In particular, he examines Covello's analysis of the salient features of such a construct: "Covello emphasized the powerful demands of family loyalty in the community, the insistence on shared responsibility in the *domus*, and a concomitant insistence on self-sacrifice" (p. 83). It is interesting to note that significant aspects of Covello's goals for BFHS—an emphasis on the community and the importance of shared responsibility both within and outside of the school—mirror his interpretation of the values of the *domus*.

At the same time, Covello was clearly trying to transform the traditional view of education within the domus. In his doctoral thesis, Covello (1972) argues that it is important to reconcile the mores of the immigrant family with those of the dominant culture in order for social development to occur in a healthy way (p. 408). He goes on to discuss the notion of disrupting the cycle of difficulties, such as dropping out and being poor, which many of his students faced: “Breaking the tradition involves understanding the tradition. It also involves making concessions to cultural groups to whom formal education and a long period of schooling is a new concept. The education of the child must be carried forward from the level at which he stands” (p. 439).

In combining an abiding appreciation and knowledge of his students’ culture with an understanding of the need to transform their lives through an activist and rigorous education, Covello established himself as both compassionate and effective. Perrone (1998) contends that Covello’s attitude and his readiness to stand with his students distinguished him from many teachers and educators:

Covello’s response was all about respect, a willingness to join together with the students’ struggles, to be in solidarity with them, to go beyond surface appearances. Whereas many teachers move from distance, standing apart, to seeing their students as victims, needing to be understood (which isn’t much of an improvement), Covello moved much further, actually joining the students, standing alongside them, being with them in their struggles. He refused to see the students as victims because they didn’t see themselves as victims. (p. 27)

Covello’s genuine love and respect for his students—he had lived many of their experiences and was ready to be with them in their struggles—gave him the kind of authority he needed to successfully collaborate with them as they learned how to be scholars and leaders.

Covello repeatedly emphasizes the importance of developing student leadership in schools. In the February 1938 issue of *Progressive Education*, he writes, regarding the boys of East Harlem: “...they needed to learn that they were the hope of their community—potential leaders through whom might come a better understanding, on the part of others, of the conflicts and needs of

the foreign-born” (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57). Covello (1972) later furthers this argument:

It becomes obvious that any educational program must be based on the principle which seems to prepare its students for intelligent leadership and participation in community and national life by providing opportunities where such functions can be exercised directly within their own community. (p. 443)

Through the explicit development of such leadership, then, Covello hoped to transform not only his students’ lives, but the life of the community as well.

What, then, was Covello’s conception of community? Featherstone (2005) notes that “‘Community’ is another big theme for Covello. As a practitioner, he works on this in small groups (classrooms, clubs), but also at a larger level: as a builder of coalitions or groups, from neighborhoods to the whole city” (p.17). This idea of interlocking and interrelated communities is supported by Covello (1938) himself when he argues that education must serve children’s need to participate in small communities that together constitute the nation and are themselves founded on the basic unit of homes (pp.125-126).

Covello clearly perceived the links between these various communities, as well as the relationships within a given community. In his dissertation, he discusses the interrelationships of social problems in East Harlem—housing, economic status, racial and national antagonisms, and cultural conflicts, among others (Covello, 1972). He notes that “Education of the young people in the ‘art of social living’ had to parallel the education of the entire community in the same direction” (p. 442). He understood that complex and interrelated social problems demanded an equally sophisticated and integrated response.

It is important to note that Covello’s work as a teacher and leader took place exclusively within all-male schools. Why was BFHS for boys only? Johaneck and Puckett (2007) observe that “A statement survives from 1938 suggesting that the grounds for this policy were pragmatic, not ideological” (p. 132), and then provide Covello’s words:

‘The school is located in a foreign-born community,’ Covello noted. ‘The majority of the parents of foreign origin are opposed to co-education. It is contrary to their established modes of thought.

It violates codes that are still rigidly approved by the older generation.’ (p.132)

In addition, in Covello’s time there were other single-sex high schools in New York City; BFHS was thus not unique in this regard.

An Integrated Curriculum: The Primacy of Culture and Social Issues

Covello’s emphasis on curricular integration also distinguishes his philosophy of teaching and curriculum development. In his autobiography he describes his dissatisfaction with the curriculum at Columbia, where students “rushed around from one class to another...There was no unifying principle around which we could center our attention” (Perrone, 1998, p. 106). A little later, he recalls a discussion he had about his education at Columbia, and the questions he asked: “...Where is the relationship with the present, with the problems of today, with the life in East Harlem, with the things that concern you and me?” (Perrone, 1998, p. 106). Thus, as a college student, Covello was already thinking about the need for a thematic and unified curriculum, and the need to relate such a curriculum to real life and real issues.

Later Covello (1938) amplified these ideas. He drew a distinction between the community-centered school on the one hand and the subject-centered or child-centered school on the other. He also discussed the need for a community school as a platform for community service. For Covello, it was not enough for a school to be child-centered. It also needed to be community-centered, with the child as an active participant in the community. In the February 1938 edition of *Progressive Education*, he writes, “To teach all of these things a different sort of school was needed from the type that builds its program around standardized scholastic conceptions and a rigid curriculum” (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57). Clearly, Covello’s vision and values could not have been accommodated within a traditional education setting.

Covello also held strong and well-founded views on the role of culture in education and the critical need for intercultural education. In his autobiography he cites the need to learn as much as possible about the students and families he is serving, especially with regard to their culture and cultural mores. He describes a conversation he had with a professor at N.Y.U. as he was beginning to consider doing his study of the social background of Southern Italians:

“For instance”, I explained to Professor Rado, “in the mind of the average Southern Italian immigrant a constant tug-of-war takes place. I run up against it all of the time. On the one hand he wants his son to have the advantages of an education never possible for himself, and on the other, centuries of tradition tell him that a boy must work, have responsibility, and contribute to the family. These are not easy to reconcile—school and work. In the average family it leads to a great deal of friction. (Perrone, 1998, p. 119)

Covello emphasized the importance of culture and ethnicity in education because he understood its significance for his students. He was intensely student-centered within a larger sociocultural context and framework.

Covello understood the complexity of assimilation, having lived it himself and studied the issue so closely. He articulates his vision of an authentic and positive assimilation:

Preservation of a natural pride in their racial inheritance is justifiable and important because it develops a sense of pride essential to wholesome living. But this should be only the basis upon which to build an enduring pride in the new American heritage and to create a national consciousness in which the best things from the older memories will be merged with a necessary loyalty to American institutions and ideals. (Covello, 1938, p.135)

Here, Covello sees the need to affirm and support his students in their culture while also helping them build a new identity that encompasses both old and new values. He echoes and expands on this vision when he discusses the importance of a community school: “But no less imperative is the need for the people of the community to live together with appreciation and understanding of one another’s cultural backgrounds, i.e., one’s customs, tastes, sentiments, beliefs” (Covello, 1972, p. 441).

Covello goes on to describe what he calls a “wider social orientation” of the child so that students see themselves as Americans, Puerto Ricans, Italians, as well as East Harlemites. Here, Covello puts himself in the camp of the cultural pluralists described by Perrone (1998):

Horace Kallen (1924) argued for a conception he called cultural pluralism, an acceptance of an American culture made up of many distinctive groups of people who retained much of their cultural base. He used the image of the orchestra to display his vision—many different instruments, with distinctive sounds, but together making and even more harmonious and vibrant sound. (p. 33)

Covello must have appreciated the power of such a vision to preserve the positive and important elements of one's particular history while also contributing to the larger construction of an American culture. Here he gives voice to his own version of cultural pluralism:

Cultural pluralism should lead then toward an integration of cultural patterns created from valuable elements in all foreign cultures. This should lead to a harmonious American culture which would be developed from an interaction among cultural groups ... It is the investigator's conviction that an understanding of the reciprocal character of the process of assimilation is a basic principle on social planning for this process. (Covello, 1972, p. 412)

Covello's emphasis on integration of cultures is important, as it allows for assimilation to become a reciprocal process that potentially enriches all cultures.

Ultimately, Covello's values—his humanism, his emphasis on relationships and community, his commitment to students and their empowerment, and the importance that he attached to intercultural education and cultural pluralism—must be seen within the overarching framework of his desire to prepare his students to be active members of a democracy, as expressed here:

The local community has long been the basic unit of democratic national life. This fact and the fact of the individuality of communities suggest the need to establish those neighborhood spheres of influence in education as an aid to our social progress and thus to our growing democracy. (Covello, 1972, p. 445)

Covello's commitment to building democratic communities was deeply felt by many of his students. In his autobiography Covello (1958) quotes from several passages of a letter that he received from Elmer Glaser, a BFHS alumna from a Jewish immigrant family:

“Democracy” was a little abstract and far away in meaning to most of us. It had begun in 1776, it had an annual ritual each November, and there were guardians of it in Washington. Almost overnight, it meant something concrete and very close. Part of it meant that I, born of a people that has been discriminated against and persecuted for many years, could meet with other common everyday people from all walks of life and discuss ideas for solving problems we all shared ... I helped older people organize meetings, learned how to write letters, how to make contacts. (Perrone, 1998, p. 141)

In his dedication to preparing students for a democratic society, Covello rested squarely in the progressive education camp of practitioners such as Dewey and Parker. He also shared their profound commitment to student-centered education and to schools that not only prepared students for life, but actually allowed them to apply their skills to real life situations as part of that preparation.

But Covello's philosophy, with its emphasis on community building, social activism, and a curriculum, took him beyond Dewey. He revealed himself to be not only compassionate and student-centered, but effective and proactive. Covello wanted his students to be able to gain the skills and habits that would give them real power to change their communities. In that, he shared more with Counts and other social reconstructionists than with Dewey and Parker. But he moved beyond Counts as well in his conception of an explicit, integrated program of intercultural education that allows the school and its community to shape its own form of cultural pluralism. Covello, then, articulated a unique brand of progressivism that both grew out of and also fed his community in multiple ways.

Covello in the Community: The Dean of East Harlem

One of the better-known roles that Leonard Covello played was that of

“Pops” Covello—teacher, leader, and principal to his students at Clinton and BFHS. This nickname reflected the reality of Covello’s role as lifelong mentor and inspiration for his students, as well as the strength of his relationships with them. Meyer (1989) writes:

To the childless Covello, Marcantonio became ‘one of my boys,’ a term that prompted the future Congressman, while at DeWitt Clinton, to begin calling him ‘Pops,’ a nickname that persisted for life. In the end, the mentor served as a pallbearer at his protégé’s funeral. (p.13)

Pignatelli (1995) supports this view of Covello as lifelong mentor to a number of his students who would go on to become community and educational leaders in their own right:

Even after his retirement he was still considered by many to be a valued member of the community. During the community control struggles in the 1960’s, he was often consulted by community activists, which is how Kohl, as he tells it, first came across Leonard Covello. Writes Kohl: “A number of the Board members, African-American and Puerto Rican, not Italian, used to tell me that they were going to visit pop and ask for his advice whenever the struggle seemed particularly difficult and the best strategy unclear. After a while I asked them who this pop was, and it turned out to be Covello, their old high school principal.” (p.4)

In preserving and developing these relationships with former students, Covello pushed the boundaries of traditional school leadership and continued to be part of community life in an active way. The relationships reveal a deeply felt and genuine interest in their lives and struggles. In a radio address on October 30, 1938, entitled “Intolerance and Hate Are Destructive Forces,” Covello spoke movingly about a BHFS student who had died tragically:

Dear Boys:

One of our students, Harry Malpica, Section 3-22, 117th Annex, died from injuries received when he was hit in the street by a truck.

On Friday night I went to see his mother and grandmother. The one thing that seemed to have lightened their sorrow was the fact that a group of boys from the 117th Street Annex had called upon them and had sent flowers for the funeral ... As I talked to these Spanish-speaking people, I could not help thinking about how fine it was that our boys should have been so thoughtful in expressing their sympathy... (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57).

Here, we can see not only the depth of Covello's feeling for Harry Malpica's family, but also the pride that he felt in his students and their sense of community and solidarity.

Covello extended his role and conception of leadership from that of an individual to one that encompassed the school and, ultimately, the community as a whole. He envisioned the school itself as a counselor and guide for community members as they negotiated day-to-day life (Covello, 1938, p. 130). Just as he wanted his students to extend themselves into the community and the wider world, Covello extended the boundaries of his own role as educational leader. Meyer (2010) places Covello within the context of a group of community leaders in the neighborhood, such as LaGuardia, Marcantonio, Salvatore Cotillo and Edward Corsi.

At BFHS, Covello continued and expanded his role as community activist and leader, grounded in his earlier work in organizations such as the Casa del Popolo, the Italian Teachers Association, and the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau. Peebles (1968) describes how Covello worked in a number of capacities to improve conditions in the neighborhood. BFHS, for example, was deeply involved in a campaign to improve the housing in East Harlem. A housing committee was formed at the school in 1935 under Covello's leadership, and a number of activities were initiated, including assemblies, rallies, and the publication of a bulletin. Ultimately, the Benjamin Franklin High School-Community Housing Committee was formed and then merged with the Harlem Legislative Conference to form what Peebles calls "the exceedingly active East Harlem Housing Committee" (p. 226), which included BFHS students. Covello gave numerous speeches and wrote articles about the housing issue, as did his students. Peebles notes that the successful result of the housing campaign was the approval by the United States Housing Authority, in

September 1939, of the New York City Housing Authority's application for a loan to construct East River Houses.

Covello himself was a community leader who spearheaded sanitation campaigns, citizenship education work, and even the publication of a local newspaper (the *East Harlem News*). Through these activities, he reshaped the roles of principal and educational leader to meet a much wider set of needs that he knew existed in East Harlem. He also involved his students in these endeavors as leaders in their own right, as we can see from a 1955 report, *Life at Franklin: A School and Its Urban Community Plan, Study and Live Together*, prepared by the Editorial Sub-Committee of the Benjamin Franklin Community Advisory Council. The report includes the following excerpt from the notes of the annual meeting of the Council:

Joe Curcio, age 14, stepped briskly before the microphone. "Fellow citizens," he began in his still piping voice, "many of our students are very disturbed about sanitation conditions in this area. We have learned that dirt breeds disease. Yet, we see uncovered garbage in our streets. Days pass and our garbage isn't collected. Some people airmail sacks of dirt out of their windows. (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57)

The report goes on to describe how Curcio and some of his BFHS classmates surveyed a few blocks of their East Harlem neighborhood and how the council decided to focus attention on sanitation in the coming year.

Here we can see how Covello became a unique educator of leaders, giving his students authentic opportunities to be community leaders and activists while they were still in high school. Peebles (1968) argues that Covello's status—being of and from the community—allowed him to assume this powerful role as educational, social, and community leader. He attributes Covello's success to his close alliances with different groups in the community and his intimate knowledge of the neighborhood's struggles and triumphs. Peebles goes on to quote from an interview with William Kirk, who served as director of Union Settlement: "[Covello] was the dean of East Harlem. He is undoubtedly the most experienced in the community and his activities were more widespread and extended over a longer period than any other person" (p. 295).

How, then, did the Dean of East Harlem manage to organize and coordinate his extensive activities so successfully? Featherstone (2005) characterizes Covello as a brilliant organizer who always “put personalism and personal relationships at the heart of his vision of teaching. And at the core of his conception of administration was a sense of the school as a community with shared relationships, meanings, passions, conversations” (p.18). In fact, Covello organized his school as an interlocking network of committees, programs, and councils, continually connecting people with one another and with various groups that would support their attempts to improve their lives. As Featherstone notes, Covello’s efforts never seem bureaucratic, since he imbued them with such a strong sense of purpose and personal meaning:

Later, as a school principal, he opts out of the conventional bureaucratic role in one of the world’s largest bureaucracies, the freshly-“rationalized” New York City school system. ...Covello redefines the role of principal: He becomes a community organizer. The main goals are to help the students and teachers become more powerful; to link the peoples of East Harlem together, especially across the chasms of language, race, class, and immigration; and to connect the strivings of school to politics in such a way that the community gets access to more power and resources. (p. 16)

Covello managed to create an efficient organizational system without succumbing to the narrow role of bureaucrat. In the appendices to his study of Covello, Peebles (1968) provides two charts. The first, “Organization of School-Community Work of the Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem,” literally connects the school on one end with the East Harlem community on the other through a series of programs and committees. On the BHFS end, there are various divisions—from the day high school and the evening elementary school to the WPA adult school and summer recreation center. These are connected directly with the Community Advisory Council and various school and community committees (such as housing, health, and student congress), and then to a number of community clubs and groups, including the Friends and Neighbors Club and the Italo-American Service League. Finally, on the East Harlem community end of the chart, there are various community goals

listed under the title “Constructive Participation in Community Life.” These include “Community Health Education” and “Development of Community Leadership” (Peebles, 1968, Appendix V).

The second chart, “The Community Advisory Council of the Benjamin Franklin High School East Harlem—A Community Centered School,” details the subcommittees of the council as well as the various neighborhood and city organizations and groups—such as business and professional groups, religious groups, and municipal departments—that link up to the council and to one another (Peebles, 1968, Appendix T). These charts demonstrate the breadth and depth of Covello’s work, as well as his vision of a truly integrated and interconnected community with the school and its students at its heart. This thorough organizational structure became the vehicle for Covello to actualize this vision and empower all members of the community—students, teachers, and all the other people of East Harlem—to collaborate with each other to improve their lives in significant and tangible ways. Johaneck and Puckett (2007) frame it as follows: “As soon as the high school was established, Covello began to fashion it as an instrument of bridging social capital, extending its reach throughout multiethnic East Harlem” (p. 256).

Connecting Community and Culture: Covello as Ethnographer

Covello, however, was not only an educational and community leader. He was also a researcher and ethnographer. Meyer (2010) discusses the importance of Covello’s 1940 Community Survey. Peebles (1968) describes the various surveys and studies—such as *The Italians in America* and *Language Use in Italian Families*—that Covello conducted under the auspices of the Casa Italiana Educational Bureau (Peebles, p. 183). Covello’s doctoral thesis also serves as an example of his work as ethnographer and researcher.

In the same way that Covello worked as a social activist while helping his students become activists themselves, he also promoted their efforts as community researchers as he was himself conducting research. Featherstone (2005) elaborates: “Covello keeps both kinds of community in mind: The projects he praises are of students doing community studies but also becoming a small community of inquirers” (p. 17). An example of this was the housing project, which Peebles describes as follows, “Local land values were studied as students accumulated pertinent data that proved useful, not only in their campaign for better housing, but also in a correlated activity, the drive for a new

high school in East Harlem” (p.226). The drive that Peebles is referring to was the campaign for a new building for BFHS. Here we can see how students became researchers linking their work to action in the community.

Covello’s role as organizer and researcher was far reaching and influential. Cordasco (1975a) writes, “Leonard Covello touched the life of the Italian community in a multiplicity of ways; there was virtually no activity organized by Italians in which Dr. Covello did not participate” (p. xi). And Orsi (2002) describes Covello’s work in creating connections between generations: “Covello devoted much of his professional life, first at Clinton, and then at BFHS, to constructing bridges between the immigrants and their children” (p.110). Again, Covello transcends the role of community leader and even ethnographer to be both a guardian and recorder of Italian culture. He was a transformational figure who proved instrumental in shaping the attitudes and ideals of a generation of Italian students in East Harlem.

Finally, it is important to recognize Covello’s innate humanism, which underlies his philosophy and the various leadership roles that he undertook. Peebles (1968) closely analyzes this aspect of Covello’s outlook: “Yet, despite his intimate and constant contact with these problems of society, Leonard Covello never wavered in his fundamental belief in the basic goodness of man and man’s capacity to change the existing environment for the better” (p. 284). To illustrate the depth of this belief, Peebles quotes an article Covello wrote in 1914: “...To be frank with you, to me the idea of God is intangible. My mind cannot grasp that idea. I feel, however, that I may reach Him through man—through humanity” (p. 285). Covello’s passionate humanism—a dedication to both the collective and the individual—inspired him to serve his community in many different ways throughout his life time.

Benjamin Franklin High School: A New Paradigm

BFHS represented a new paradigm—in both its conception and its implementation—of schooling. This was largely a result of Covello’s vision of activist progressivism. In his doctoral thesis he described in detail his goals and roles for a community-centered school. These include an institution that:

- serves as explorer of community social backgrounds
- coordinates school departments and personnel

- plans for the actual needs of the child; directly channels inter-communication between school and community (through contacts with homes, youth groups and social agencies)
- participates in community activities through a committee made up of students, teachers, parents and community representatives
- instigates community participation in school and promotes the use of school resources to benefit the community
- functions as a base for the establishment of “outposts” in the community; serves as a socializing agency in intercultural relationships ...in the development of community-consciousness and communal cooperative efforts
- is a center for adult education, as well as an educational guidance center for all community members; and serves as a testing ground for leadership within the school and as a training ground for community leadership. (Covello, 1972, pp. 414-415)

This comprehensive vision was realized through the founding of BFHS, and was reflected consistently throughout the time that Covello was principal. It is most evident in the vigorous and genuine participation of students in the life of the school and its community activities. A 1938 publication, “Student Participation in Community Life,” written by Covello, Austen Works (the faculty advisor to the Student Congress), and Albert Hensing (the student president of the BFHS Student Congress), reflects Covello’s commitments: “The Community Advisory Council of the Benjamin Franklin High School counts students as participating and voting members of fifteen of its nineteen school-community committees, along with faculty members and prominent members of the community” (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57). One such committee, described in the same 1938 publication, was the Peace Committee, whose “[s]tudent members...organized a Peace Day program and arranged several open forums on the question. They invited prominent speakers to these forums, to which the citizens of the community were invited” (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57).

Covello, Works, and Hensing describe still another instance of the connection between social and community activism and the curriculum at BFHS:

There is a special fourth-year English class in Benjamin Franklin High School designed to develop qualities of leadership and to acquaint students with the thought and attitudes of outstanding American authors on current problems of American democracy. Each student is asked to select a problem and follow it through in the field of American literature. Students are grouped in accordance with the problem they have selected and each group is asked to report to the class at stated intervals on the results of and inferences to be drawn from their reading. Each group is asked to do actual field work in its phase of the general subject. For example, the group studying problems of the slum will be expected to make personal investigations of actual slum conditions; the group studying the problem of the “melting pot” will be expected to ascertain through observation the difficulties presented in the adjustment of racial differences and animosities... (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57).

This description indicates that students were not only deeply involved in community service and activism, but were also engaged in a process of looking critically (through literature, for example) at such issues within the context of American history and contemporary life.

It is also instructive to hear the voices of the students themselves as they wrote and spoke about the school and its community role. Hensing was interviewed by NBC on June 29, 1938:

The need for community-school co-operation is great. The need for student participation in this co-operation between the school and the community, is even greater. For it is undeniable, that our future attitudes and relationship to the community is being shaped by our present experience in high school. (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57)

It is notable that a high school student would express such a philosophy so coherently. We can hear echoes of both Dewey and Counts in the sentiment expressed here that school should not merely be a preparation for life, but a valuable experience of life itself.

Of course, the students were not the only ones involved in such efforts. The faculty was also critically invested in ensuring that the school was of and for the community. Orsi (2002) discusses how Covello developed a list of community problems that served as a fact sheet for teachers at BFHS who had volunteered to serve on a speakers' committee representing East Harlem to the rest of the city. These problems included poor housing, cultural factionalism, and the isolation of the neighborhood from the rest of the city. The fact that Covello would create such a list and share it with his teachers is both important and telling; it indicates that, like the students, the faculty must also have had the responsibility of getting involved in the community in a variety of ways, including serving on speakers' committees.

There are many examples of problems that were addressed through the school's committees and community projects, including sanitation campaigns, the creation of a neighborhood garden, and the founding of the *East Harlem News*. Peebles (1968) quotes from a 1964 interview with Philip Cox, who was at that time professor emeritus at N.Y.U.'s School of Education and who characterized Covello's work as follows:

Another contribution of his was taking hold of some great civic problem that was already stirring the interest of the people of the community and seeing in every way the school could support it and tie into it, which meant that not only the movement got aid from the school but the school got understanding and support from the community groups. The housing problem was a great example of this. But, he had many more than that. (p. 198)

Peebles (1968) also describes in detail the citizenship education projects that BFHS students worked on in collaboration with Covello. These projects were distinguished by a high degree of student participation, extensive activities both inside and outside of the school, and Covello's personal involvement. For instance, Peebles writes:

From the school's Leadership Club and Speakers' Club came student volunteers who visited and spoke at elementary schools in the community for the purpose of creating interest in the naturalization drive and to distribute literature pertaining to the

steps that had to be taken in order to gain citizenship status. (p. 248)

Such an undertaking is an example of progressive activism in a highly potent form: high school students serving as community leaders involved in an important service project with younger students and potentially inspiring a new generation of student activists.

BFHS's "store fronts" represent a highly effective manifestation of its community-centered mission. Peebles (1968) describes the creation of these social centers, beginning with a meeting of the Executive Council of the Association of Parents, Teachers and Friends of BHFS at which "one of the members pointed out the need for a social center near the school which would be available for a variety of community and social groups" (p. 234). That suggestion resulted in the establishment of many neighborhood clubs and organizations that served the community:

The club became a social center for the neighborhood where friends and neighbors met. Cooking and art classes were held there, choral groups were able to use it for rehearsals, boys' and girls' social clubs held meetings there as did various departments of the high school. The program of the club developed as the neighborhood needs emerged ... This was the beginning of what became known as the Street Units or Store Fronts of Benjamin Franklin High School, making educational programs accessible to the men, women, and children living in the tenements surrounding the school. (pp. 235-236)

By extending the school in such tangible ways into the community, as well as welcoming the community into the school through a variety of programs (summer school, adult education classes, etc.), Covello fashioned an institution that was organically and systematically integrated with the community.

One of the school's store fronts was the Friends and Neighbors Club. In an article in the October 1939 issue of the *Junior Red Cross Journal*, three BFHS students—Michael Lombardo, Joseph Bayza, and Leonard Kramm—wrote about the community-centered school and described a meeting at that club:

Only recently an important meeting was called by the Inter-Racial Understanding Committee at the Friends and Neighbors Club, at which all the nationalities of East Harlem were represented ... the most significant thing about this meeting was the tremendous amount of cooperation and understanding displayed by all, each group sacrificing its own interests for the benefit of the community as a whole. (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57)

The article is itself another example of the way that the students internalized the mission of the school and were given opportunities to articulate their experiences in public forums.

The article also illustrates Covello's commitment to intercultural education and collaboration, and the importance that he ascribed to creating what Peebles (1968) calls a "cultural democracy" (p. 295). This dedication was evident in a wide number of programs and projects (including assemblies, curricular integration, and conferences) as well as through meetings such as the one Lombardo, Bayza, and Kramm described. The Covello Papers include information about numerous BFHS assembly programs. Many of them—such as a 1935 Japanese Guest Program, which featured a talk and a jiu-jitsu exhibition; and a Spanish Program the same year, at which the speaker was Herbert Wanstock from the Committee on Cultural Relations with Latin America—focused on specific countries and ethnic groups. Other assemblies, for example, featured British, African, Jewish, or German songs, dances, and dramatic readings (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57).

These assemblies were part of a larger attempt to promote an appreciation of different cultures. An undated and anonymous publication, "Intercultural Experiment at Benjamin Franklin High School: Excerpts from a Field Note Book" describes an exhaustive program dedicated to that goal. In addition to the guest speakers and discussions at the assemblies themselves there were also "planned social situations." At these, "students, teachers and representatives of the cultural group had a chance to meet with each other. Often, this social situation was a tea in honor of the guests, given immediately after assembly." At other times, there were guest speakers in classrooms throughout the day. And there were "student follow up programs," when "after about a month's study as a group the students gave their own assembly program" (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57). In all of these activities, we can again see the high degree of student

participation and leadership involved in the school's programs, as well as a concrete manifestation of Covello's belief in cultural pluralism.

BFHS's program of intercultural education grew even more ambitious as the school developed. In an article written in 1944, Rita Morgan, the director of the school's Community Activities program, describes the fully integrated and extensive set of methods used at BFHS. In addition to the assemblies and their associated activities discussed above, these included: materials on bulletin boards and in display cases; "Brotherhood Week" in February, with ceremonies, exhibits, lessons, and discussions; an interracial committee made up of students, faculty, and community members; after-school clubs; an ongoing program of parent education based on the ideas of tolerance and respect; and the integration of the intercultural curriculum into every department at the school (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57).

The work at BFHS was all the more remarkable because it was taking place in a neighborhood in which cultural tensions were commonplace. In her 1944 article, Morgan writes about the poor housing, poverty, and unsanitary conditions in East Harlem, and explains that:

The problems in intercultural relations among the people in the community are intensified as a result. In the streets of the community boys and even girls of all ages form groups often based on national or racial origins for offensive or defensive purposes. Certain streets are forbidden [to] members of another racial or national group and members of that group who venture on them are attacked by organized gangs on the other side. (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57)

The academic curriculum at BFHS supported and benefited from all of the other intercultural activities at the school. As noted in "Learning the Ways of Democracy: A Case Book of Civic Education," published by The Educational Policies Commission in 1940: "Each department [at BFHS] has prepared a syllabus for intercultural education based on the study of racial differences and attitudes" (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57). Examples of such curricular integration abound. For instance, an undated report from the Art Department describes one of its classes, which was required of all students: "This course shall aim to engender love of beauty, to develop good taste, to enrich life and train for

leisure, to gratify the desire to create, to encourage talent, and to promote respect, appreciation and understanding of the Italian, Negro, Jewish and Puerto Rican (Spanish) races” (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57). It is noteworthy that the course focused on the four major cultures of East Harlem at that time.

Other departments also integrated intercultural studies into their curriculum. The “English Department Report on Tolerance Activities – Intercultural Education,” dated November 5, 1943, states: “In furthering both religious tolerance and inter-group good will among the students of our school, we have incorporated into our English studies syllabus modifications looking toward this goal, and a variety of special class activities” (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57). An example of such curricular work includes the following, also from the English Department Report:

The core for Term VII is The Literature of Moral Protest of Social Problems. In this grade the consideration of the rights of minorities and of the need for religious toleration is given major emphasis ... The Enemy of the People is read in honors classes. This play stresses the importance, for the health of a democracy, of safeguarding the rights of minorities. (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57)

The French program also supported the goals of activism and intercultural understanding. The “Summary of French Lessons Dealing with Inter-Racial Program”, written in January of 1939 by Daisy Katz, describes a curriculum intended to develop the attitudes of a “citizen of the world,” in which there are discussions of the French “race”; a correspondence project between students at BFHS and French students, sponsored by the French club; and an assembly program that stresses the similarities between the interests of French and American students (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57).

Another key aspect of the intercultural education program at BHFS was the creation of conferences dealing with racial relations and intercultural issues. Peebles (1968) characterizes these as follows:

Numerous conferences dealing with ethnic group relations were held at Covello’s high school. Two examples of these were the “Greater New York Conference on Racial and Cultural Relations

in the United States,” and the “Conference on Racial Conflict.” The former, held on December 12, 1942, was sponsored by several organizations including the Benjamin Franklin High School Racial Committee, American Jewish Congress, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Conference of Christians and Jews, National Urban League, and the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born. (p. 272)

It is a tribute to BHFS that it hosted a conference of this caliber (which included many nationally prominent organizations) and it is important to note that students were involved as planners and participants; they were given the opportunity to address critically important issues with significant local and national implications at a conference attended by members of well known advocacy groups. In a speech at the inaugural seminar of the Teachers as Scholars Project at the University of North Dakota, Perrone (1999) referred to the conference and remarked:

... Daniel Patrick Moynihan, currently New York’s senior Senator, presented as a Benjamin Franklin High School student, the following resolutions: an end to racial segregation in the armed forces; the merging of Negro and White blood banks by the Red Cross; and increase in teachers representing various racial and cultural groups; and the appointment of a Director of Intercultural Education to support teachers in New York schools to promote inter group understanding. (p. 6)

The political implications of the work that BHFS students were engaged in is clear. Moynihan, like Marcantonio (and presumably other BHFS alumni), went on to become a highly effective political leader. Indeed, Featherstone (2005) writes that Moynihan himself acknowledged the school’s role in his development as an activist; he once told Featherstone “that ‘Pop’ had inspired Moynihan’s first political act—a motion he proposed in the school’s student assembly to condemn separate blood collections for white and Negro soldiers in the World War II army” (p. 16).

Other students were also immersed in the school’s intercultural curriculum. In an undated essay, “What Should We Do About Problems

Between Groups?” one wrote, “We should pass a federal anti-lynching law, laws making discrimination in public housing, hospitals and medical positions, and in schools illegal. We should see to it that discrimination in the armed forces is stopped” (Papers, Boxes 33, 52, and 57). Clearly, Covello’s students were not only deeply influenced by the work in which they engaged at the school, but also helped shape it in significant ways. In fact, it was Covello’s willingness to take on the burning issues of the day—and engage his students, faculty, school, and community in such struggles—that put him on the cutting edge of progressive education. He built an institution in which the community and school were organically intertwined; students were vital members of the school, serving as collaborators in a variety of projects and activities; and the priorities of the curriculum and community organizations were social and political activism, as well as a fully integrated program of intercultural education.

Why Covello Matters Today

Covello’s life and work continue to be relevant and powerful today. They serve as constant reminders of the importance of a progressive, humanistic approach to teaching and learning. He demonstrates the value of building relationships and of the importance of community, both as an anchor for schools and as an organic extension of their activities. His career is a model for how school leaders, and schools themselves, can play multiple and profound roles in the community.

An important aspect of this community school paradigm is Covello’s fundamental belief that students are not victims of their circumstances, but rather leaders in training who deserve teachers who can stand with them as they grow into their own roles as activists. His example induces us to shape our schools and classrooms as laboratories in which students gain real life experiences and in which they can, in the tradition of Jane Addams and others, become researchers and ethnographers in their own right.

Thus, Covello stresses the importance of a unified, thematic curriculum that is not just relevant, but is also explicitly political; it asks students to identify and begin to solve the problems in their communities and beyond. In addition, Covello creates a framework, through his focus on intercultural education, in which students can connect their classroom learning back to their own culture and to the many other cultures that surround them. These aspects of Covello’s work are especially timely in the age of No Child Left Behind and serve as

particularly powerful models for educating immigrants who can become leaders and activists in a democracy.

Covello's many contributions to understanding the potential role that schools can play in educating citizen leaders for a democracy are profound. Featherstone (2005) characterizes them as follows:

As a practitioner, he enacted the democratic counter-professionalism of Jane Addams, Margaret Healey, and John Dewey, insisting that personal relations and community and the promotion of a new democracy were the heart of teaching. Each of these values and roles and ways of operating—border-crossing, the variations on the theme of community, culture-making as a central value, critical professionalism—are a subset of a larger commitment: to that protean and Whitmanesque dream of democracy and democratic power. The purpose of organizing was the same as the purpose of education: to help the people gain the power. (p.19)

Leonard Covello was thus an original leader in the struggle to create an inclusive and socially active democracy based on egalitarian principles and cultural pluralism. He is an inspirational figure for anyone interested in the future of progressive education.

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